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TENDERFOOT JONES
NOVEL OF A FIGHTING GREENHORN
by **WALT COBURN**

WAGON WHEELS, ROLLING TO HELL!
NOVEL OF THE PIKE'S PEAK TRAIL
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STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-TWO FEBRUARY, 1944 NUMBER ONE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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Now, as in the old frontier days, good neighbors are never found wanting!

MARCH ISSUE OUT FEBRUARY 11th!

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The Branding Corral

Conducted by Strawboss

SEEMS that the following letter, sent in by Joe Carlson, of Seattle has the makings of some pretty good arguments, so we're putting it at point for this session. Like they say in the newspapers, Joe Carlson's views do not necessarily reflect the opinions of this magazine, Yours Truly, nor the printer's devil. That, of course, goes for all the hands who swap *habla* around the Corral. But after all, it's a difference of opinion that makes a horse race, so let's go, Joe:

Dear Strawboss:

When you think about the West and its history, one main fact impresses itself more and more on your mind; that is, that the settlement of the frontier was, fundamentally, up to the guys who went in there and fought—the two-bit ranchers, the general mine-run of folks who couldn't be bluffed or bullied or kicked out. The guys who could take it, as well as dish it out.

I think that the Nazis and the Japs are finding that out. And that's not taking credit away from any other part of the country, either.

I've found out that most people who make their living out of doors are pretty good fighters, too. More than that, they're good people. I've worked on farms, in lumber camps, a little in the cattle-country of northern New Mexico and in North Dakota and Western Kansas, but after those places were tamed considerable. Shipped out on a freighter from the West Coast before the War, and done some gandy dancing on the Santa Fe. For straight-shooting friends, I'll take any of the men I've worked with any time in preference to a desk-worker, or city man.

Walking along a city street, you find that all the faces of the folks look pretty much the same. All of 'em worried. All of 'em rushing to catch a bus or subway. Afraid they'll have to wait two minutes there on a smelly, crowded platform until the next bus or train comes along. They look like they were mostly cut out of the same piece of paper—and had just about as much depth to their characters.

Worry—that spells "city" to me. Afraid they might get fired from their two-bit jobs. Afraid their wife will raise hell if they're late and the meat's burned *(What meat?—Strawboss)*. Or if they've made their pile, all they can eat is some crackers and milk, on account of they've wrecked their health worrying about how business is going, and now they worry because they haven't got anything more to worry about. They get their yearly vacation and maybe go to some dude ranch and the dude wrangler has to wipe their noses for 'em and think hard about the good wages he gets, or he'd draw his time and get a respectable job.

To hell with the cities and the folks who live in 'em!

I've bunked with men who had to endorse their pay-checks with an X, but who could out-argue any college professor I ever saw. Had good more hard common sense, too.

But maybe I'm talking too fast.

One of the best friends a man could want I found in the city jail in Pocatello, some years back. His name was Domingo, meaning Sunday, a big, easy-going Mexican fellow, with the kind of a laugh that made you think that the world—even if it was just a jail bull-pen—was an all-right place. Seems

(Please turn to page 124)

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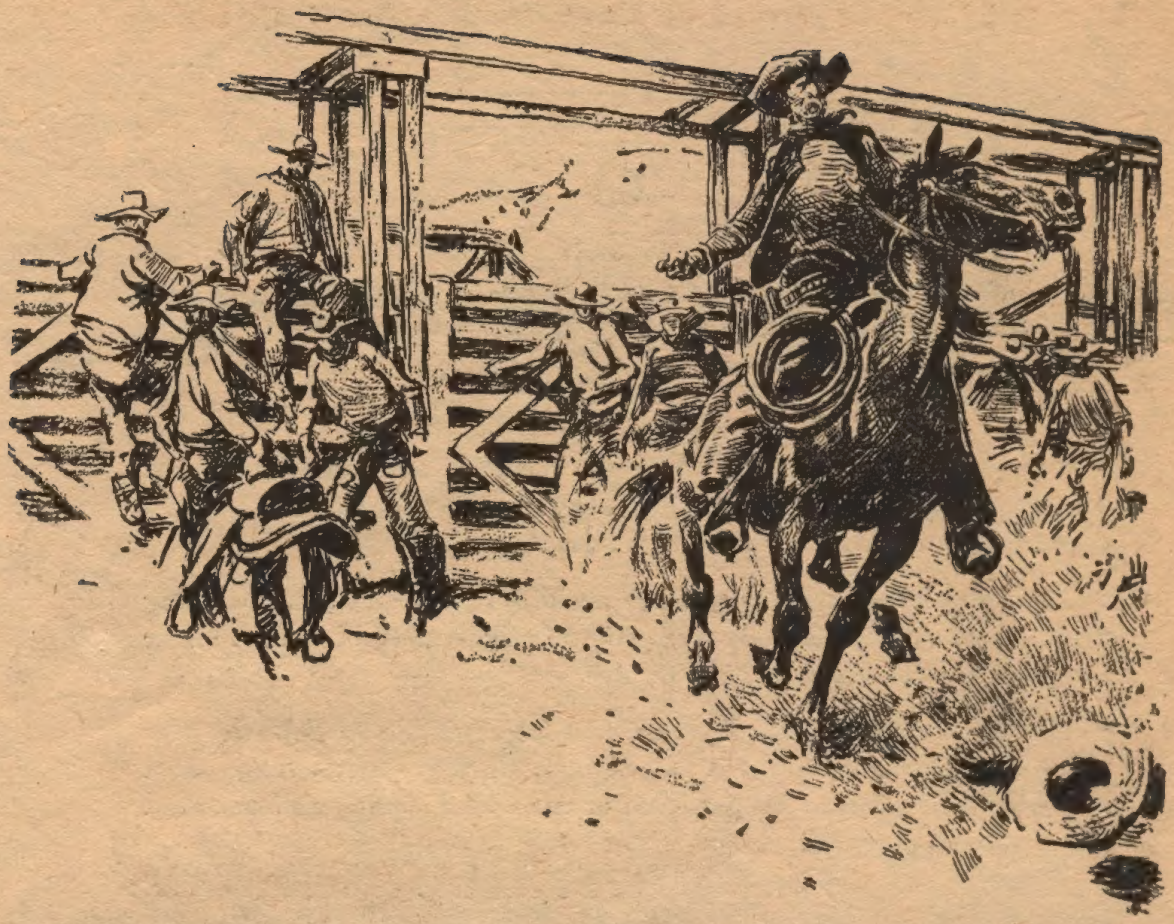


TENDERFOOT JONES

By Walt Coburn

Those small-spread cowmen hocked their shirts to bet on Wild Horse Holliday's mysterious bronc-rider, never guessing that they'd made their last desperate gamble on a greenhorn dude who had the reckless nerve to pay off—win, lose, or draw—in his own life's blood!

CHAPTER ONE

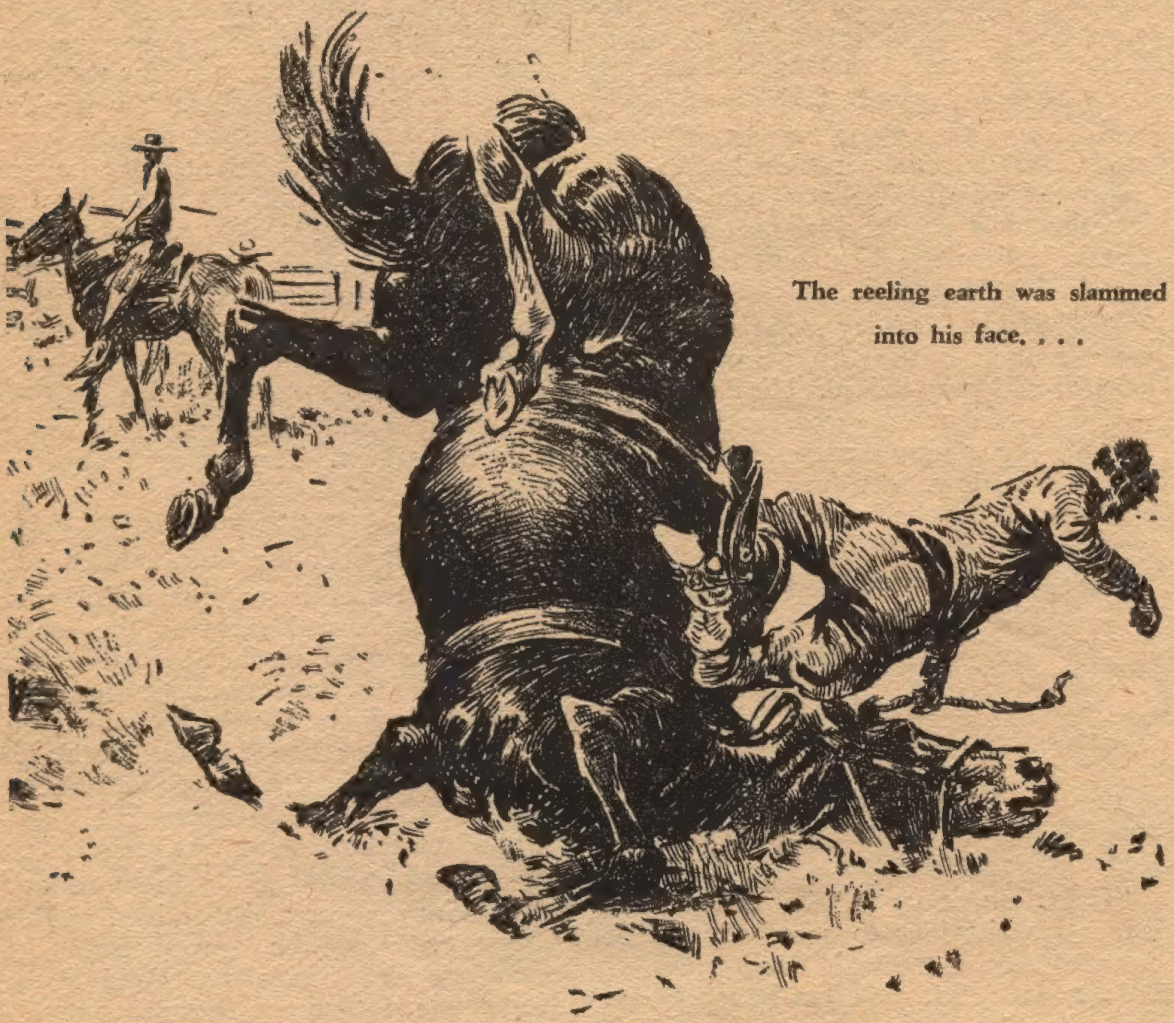
Wild Horse's Rodeo Ringer

THEY had turned from the lobby of the hotel into rodeo headquarters and the place was packed with forty-a-month cowhands, wagon bosses, general ramrods and the owners of the big spreads. Mingling with these was a sizeable sprinkling of professional rodeo cowboy contestants who had been attracted here by the big purses offered by the little cow-town of Red Coulee, Montana. It was prize money that took the Red Coulee Round-Up out of the henyard rodeo class. And now it was this same big prize money that threatened to cause a riot of dangerous proportions.

"What chance," was the general complaint among the cowpunchers, "has us local talent to win ag'in' them professionals?"

They had paid down their cash money for entrance fees, and those fees went into the big jackpot that, together with the money put up by the cow outfits, made up the big purses in every event.

A Stirring Novel of Back-to-the-Wall Cowmen



The reeling earth was slammed into his face. . . .

From the start there had been the hostile rivalry between the two or three big cow outfits and the numerous smaller spreads that worked the range as the Red Coulee Pool.

A burly deputy sheriff stood guard at the roped-off corner of the hotel lobby where the mayor, acting as president of the Red Coulee Round-Up, resplendant in a purple silk shirt, a yellow silk neckscarf and store boots that were giving his bunions hell, sat behind a big flat topped desk with a pair of helpers. Sweat slipped from under his cheap grade ten gallon white hat and down across his red jowls. He raked in and counted the entrance fees.

His two assistants, one the banker and the other the hotel owner, both gaudily arrayed in would-be cowboy regalia, entered the names, home towns and other information in their ledgers.

"Them as has paid their entrance fees," bawled the burly deputy, also decked out in gaudy holiday garb, "git on outside. Lay your money on the barrelhead, git your contestant number, then take the air. You're millin' around like a corral full of bulls. Drag your tails outside—"

From the saloon came a loud, high-keyed wolf howl followed by a crashing thud against the nailed door separating the saloon from the lobby.

The mayor of Red Coulee groaned and miscounted a contestant's money. There was a look of desperation in his spectacled eyes and his voice was a moaning wail.

"Do something, Butch!" he appealed to the burly deputy. "If that man starts another of his drunken brawls in here, throw him in jail!"

"Jail ol' Wild Horse Holliday?" The burly deputy shook his head. "I'd git knocked down, tromped on an' left layin'.

Mayor, if I laid a hand on that ol' wart-hog. Even if I got 'im locked up, them Pool fellers would tear that two-bit jail apart a-gittin' 'im out. Oh, lordy!"

The connecting door gave way with a crash. A spurred boot kicked aside the splintered wood. The man who lurched into the lobby from the saloon was so tall that he had to stoop to come in through the six foot doorway.

Wild Horse Holliday stood six feet six inches without his boots. He was leathery-skinned and gray-haired. His humorous, straight-lipped mouth was partly hidden by a drooping gray mustache. Sober, he talked in a slow, soft drawl. On one of his town sprees, he howled like a prairie wolf.

Both big calloused, weathered hands held bunches of crumpled money. His flannel shirt and levis were faded, patched and clean, but his boots, 5X beaver Stetson, and the black silk neckerchief were new and of the finest quality. Wild Horse Holliday had come up the trail with one of the first Texas herds, and made Montana his home. He was head man of the Red Coulee Cattle Pool.

"Come on, Sorrel!" he called back across his shoulder to somebody in the crowded saloon. "Don't hang back like a dang mule that ain't bin halter broke. Foller me!"

"But listen, mister," a voice sounded from the packed saloon, "I told you—"

"*You* listen, you sorrel-maned young mav'rick! I'll do the tellin' aroun' here, and see to it they stay told. Ol' Wild Horse Holliday from Wild Horse Crick. Hear me howl!"

His leather-lunged wolf howl filled the crowded, smoke-laden lobby. He freed one hand by shoving a fistfull of money into a pocket of his levis. Reaching behind him, he grabbed a lanky freckled redhead by the front of his shirt and dragged him through the doorway.

★

THE young man was certainly neither cowpuncher or rodeo contestant, if you judge a man by his clothes. His lightweight summer suit was tailored, his white broadcloth shirt made to measure, the white buckskin shoes with brown trimmings were custom made. His Panama hat with gay colored silk band was of the finest weave. He was the only man in town wearing a coat, or shoes instead of high-heeled boots. His freckled face was hot and flushed and his wiry red hair damp with sweat. But he was grinning good naturedly and the light in his gray-green eyes showed amusement.

"Make a lane, cowhands!" bellowed Wild Horse Holliday, "If Holliday starts another riot in here," groaned the red-jowled mayor, "I'll—"

The grinning crowd gave way. There was cheering and rough joshing billowing from the saloon. The packed lobby was enjoying it.

Wild Horse Holliday half dragged the red-headed dude to the desk in the corner.

"I'm enterin' this sorrel-named pilgrim in every dadburned event on the books. Si, you four-eyed, pot-bellied politico son of a taller-keg, how much is the damages? And gimme the key to your store. The boy needs a pair of boots. Here's his entrance fees. Write him down in them books fer the work's—bronc-ridin', bull-doggin,' steer ropin' an' calf tyin'. Pull up the slack in them four-five chins, Si."

Si Shinn, mayor and merchant of Red Coulee, counted the money from the crumpled pile of bills that Wild Horse Holliday had slammed down on the littered table and shoved the rest back at the grinning old Texan.

"What's you contestant's name, Holliday?" His voice trembled with pent-up anger.

"How'd I know his name. He just got off the stagecoach. What's your name, Sorrel?"

"Jones," grinned the lanky young dude. "Livingston Jones."

Right behind him a husky rodeo contestant whom Wild Horse Holliday had shoved aside, quit scowling and laughed. It was a loud, taunting laugh.

"Livingston!" he leered. He was a little drunk.

The flush drained from the dude's lean face. "It's my name," he said quietly. "I like it."

"Mama musta got it outa a fairy-tale book," grinned the big rodeo cowboy.

Livingston Jones wondered if anybody could see his knees shaking. Fear was crawling like a slimy thing inside his belly.

His thumping heart was pumping the blood into his throat. He felt at the mercy of every man here, even that wolf-howling old reprobate who was using him for a buffoon. His was an inborn fear of physical violence.

Without moving his head, the big contestant sprayed the Tenderfoot's white buckskin shoes with tobacco juice. Then his hamlike palm slapped the dude's freckled face, and snapped Livingston Jones' head back, sending him a step or two backwards. The expensive Panama hat was knocked off onto the floor.

A dry sob tore from the youngster's throat. His next actions were those of a trapped animal goaded into fighting for its life. He felt numb all over, as he often had during one of those horrible nightmares, from which he had awakened bathed with the cold sweat of fear.

But to Wild Horse Holliday and every other man looking on, there was nothing clumsy about it. They saw the long arms come up, saw the long legs move, the feet shift in an easy shuffling. Then a pair of freckled fists were starting like pile drivers. The lanky, loose jointed body moving back and forth like whalebone.

Bones crunched and broke, blood spurted. The big rodeo cowboy's head rocked from side to side as those short, vicious blows landed. He tried to fight back with clumsy flailing fists, but failed to land even a grazing blow. He tried to block and cover. But that freckled dude with the shock of unruly wiry red hair knocked down his guard and drove his fists into the battered face that no longer grinned. The big cowboy coughed and spat out a broken tooth.

Groggy, out on his braced legs, he still flailed the air with feeble blows that did not connect. Then Livingston Jones moved in on his shuffling feet. His long left cocked back, then shot out. His fist was buried out of sight in the cowboy's belly at a spot just under the breastbone.

The big rodeo cowboy's eyes rolled back in their sockets until the bloodshot whites showed. He went down in a shapeless heap.

"There," muttered another professional rodeo cowboy, "goes first money in the bronc-ridin' an' doggin."

Livingston Jones was breathing hard. He rubbed his skinned knuckles on his blood-spattered shirt. He stared down, unbelieving, at the unconscious, blood-smeared man on the floor. The freckles stood out like black warts on his pale face.

"Where," Wild Horse Holliday's voice almost awed, "did you learn how to do a job like that, son?"

"Boxing was a part of our gym class at college. . . . Compulsory."

"Compulsory," grinned Wild Horse Holliday, "ain't the word I had in mind. Let's likker up."

★

HE LED the dazed pilgrim back into the saloon and ordered drinks for the house. He told the bartender to set out a bottle of his oldest bonded stuff and two tall beer chasers.

He told Livingston Jones that it was the neatest job he'd ever seen done. Only why the hell couldn't it have been that big Max Maxson or one of his damned Rail R top cowhands.

"But it's still early in the day, Sorrel. I'll point out Maxson to yuh when we cut his sign. Trim Max's wick like you done with Nevada Joe Hunter, and you kin write your own ticket with the Red Coulee Pool."

Livingston Jones gulped down his raw whiskey, coughed, washed the raw burn with ice cold beer, and grinned faintly. He said he'd had all the fighting he wanted. He'd just come West to take a look at the country. And what did Wild Horse have against this Max Maxson, anyhow?

The tall Texan chewed an end of his drooping ragged moustache them thumbed it aside and drank and refilled his empty whiskey glass. He said it wasn't just that big, loud-mouthed, swelled-headed Max. But the Rail R was crowding the little fellers out of business.

Maxson was the Rail R ramrod. And Max had gotten to some of the Red Coulee Pool cowman with Rail R money. They'd coyoted, and now there was only Wild Horse Holliday and mebbyso one-two more little ranchers who would refuse to be crowded out by money or guns. They'd battle Max and his syndicate-

owned Rail R till her horns were bloody as a butcher's apron. And how much would Livingston Jones take, folding money laid on the line, to give Max Maxson one of them working overs like he'd just dealt out to the runner-up for the title of World Champion Cowboy? Just to cripple 'im, savvy?

Livingston Jones surveyed himself in the bar mirror. He drank the glass of bonded whiskey the grizzled Texan shoved into his hand. He wiped the tears from his eyes, and cooled his throat with more beer.

"It's the first drink of straight whiskey I ever had," he made apology. "I'd better wash up, and get into some other clothes and get outside of some breakfast. I don't want to get swacked."

"About cleanin' Max's plow, Sorrel? Name your own price."

Livingston Jones shook his head. The whiskey was warming his empty belly. His face felt hot and fear no longer crawled inside him. Whiskey, he said, was a great institution, man's best friend and worst enemy. He knew a rhyme about it, but it had slipped his mind at the moment. And it was his turn to buy a drink. One last libation. Then if he could purchase a ten gallon hat and a pair of high heeled cowboy boots. . . .

Red Coulee Pool cowpunchers were gathered around him. Some of the professional rodeo cowboys had thrown water of Nevada Joe Hunter and dragged him into the saloon and propped him against the bar. They eyed Livingston Jones and Wild Horse Holliday with sullen, bitter, smoldering animosity. But the Rail R cowpunchers were jubilant. They were offering odds now that their ramrod Max Maxson would win the bronc riding and bulldogging. With Nevada Joe out of the contest, Max was a cinch bet. Or so they figured.

"Them land-grabbin', cattle-rustlin' snakes," muttered Wild Horse Holliday. "If I was forty years younger—"

"I'd like to shake the hand," sounded a heavy voice behind them, "that knocked out the only man that could give me trouble. Too bad, Wild Horse, that your dude can't ride a bronc like he fights."

There was heavy mockery in the rasping voice. Before Livingston Jones turned around he saw the man's reflection in the bar mirror.

Max Maxson was a six footer with wide shoulders and lean flanks. His hair was straw colored and his eyes a pale shade of gray. There was a contemptuous twist to the grin on his handsome face. His clothes marked him for a range dude.

Until he had gotten the job of ramrodding the big Rail R outfit, Max Maxson had toured the rodeo circuit and had been close to the top among the best rodeo contestants throughout the country. He had been with the Buffalo Bill Show when it played Chicago, and there the Chicago syndicate that owned the Rail R had hired him to replace an older foreman who was too friendly with the smaller outfits that made up the Red Coulee Pool. Max Maxson had made good in a ruthless, shrewd way that made enemies but paid big dividends.

"How the hell do you know Sorrel can't ride a bronc?" snorted Wild Horse Holliday. "Listen, Purty Max, I'll cover all you got, even money, that Sorrel Jones beats them fancy pants off you at saddle bronc ridin'. Put up or shut up, Fancy Britches."

Wild Horse Holliday was pulling wads of crumpled banknotes from both pockets of his old levis.

CHAPTER TWO

The Tenderfoot Plays His Hand

TWO thousand dollars was a lot of money for any man to bet on the saddle bronc riding. Too many things can go wrong, for the best rider doesn't always win first money. He might draw a sorry bronc that won't pitch, or his bronc might be hard to ride but not put up a spectacular show, while a more showy ride on an easier horse might grab day money. Or the judges might not be fair or competent.

The men working the chutes can wear the buck out of a bronc, sull him before the chute gate swings open. And the gate can be opened a second or two before the rider is set to go. A lot of things under the head of tough luck can rob a man of his first money ride, and Max Maxson knew that as well or better than

the next man. But he had pulled out a bulging leather wallet and was counting its contents onto the bar in hundred dollar bills.

It was, the Rail R ramrod grinned to himself, a cinch bet. If this red-headed, speckle-faced dude was a bronc-peeler, then he—Max Maxson—was a preacher! This Livingston Jones didn't look like he could stick on a merry-go-round horse without pulling leather. It was like picking up two thousand bucks in the street. And two thousand simoleons was a lot of money in any man's language.

Wild Horse Holliday thought so, too, as he matched the big tow-headed foreman's bet, dollar for dollar. Max got a flat salary of a hundred a month, and he wasn't the saving kind. The grizzled Texan wasn't wondering how Max Maxson's wallet got that fat with yellow folding money, for he had a hunch just how the Rail R ramrod came by his gambling money. What surprised him was that big Max was damn fool enough to flash the roll like that.

The grizzled old ramrod of the Red Coulee Pool had purposely prodded Max into making the big play. Calling him Purty Max and Fancy Britches had done it. Maxson was almighty thin-skinned at times. He was one of those big joshers that can't take any kind of a hoorawing from anybody.

The straight whiskey and beer chasers had made Livingston Jones a little light headed. He was relaxed and beginning to have fun. Pool cowpunchers were pumping his skinned knuckled right hand and slapping him on the back and telling him that his money was wooden and have another snort. He was, for the first time in his young life, something of a hero.

He had never before knocked a man down outside of the boxing ring at school. He had always cringed away from fights, and arguments of any kind made him a little quivery inside, and he'd always walked away from trouble. Winning that scrap had left him a little dazed and bewildered. And now, aided by the drinks, he'd lost actual count and he felt the glow of it. And, he grinned at his reflection in the bar mirror, tighter than a tick.

But, he decided, he had better set his newly found friend and champion straight before this betting got serious. He tugged at the tall cowman's shirt tail. "Hey, you know that I never rode a bucking horse in my life."

". . . . Nineteen," Wild Horse Holliday smoothed the wrinkles out of another hundred dollar bill and slapped it on top of the stack of money in front of him on the bar, *"and* twenty! Two thousand bucks, Fancy Britches. Fatty kin hold the stakes."

Fatty was the saloonman who was tending his own bar trade. He gathered in the two piles of money and shoved it all into a small canvas money sack and put it into the big old safe in his office at the front end of the bar.

"Now let go my shirt tail, Sorrel," said Wild Horse Holliday. "What was it you was mutterin'?"

"I said I never rode a bucking horse in my life."

"Up till ten minutes ago," chuckled the grizzled cowman, "you'd never knocked out Nevada Joe Hunter, neither. There's always a first time fer everything. And don't go around givin' up a lot of head about not bein' able to set a horse. Some of them Rail R fellers is already gittin' kinda superstitious about you bein' a ringer I've imported fer the occasion." He ran a hard, calloused thumb along the ribs of Livingston Jones.

"Let's shuck you outa them store clothes, son. If Si Shinn's Mercantile is locked, we'll throw a horseshoe through his new front plate glass winder an' foller it in. Gotta git you a pair of boots."

He let out his wolf howl and piloted the somewhat wobbly Livingston Jones outside and onto the street, down the wide plank sidewalk to the Mercantile. The store doors were closed and locked. Wild Horse Holliday was looking around for an old horseshoe or a rock when Livingston Jones tugged at his shirt tail. He had learned that the only way to get the grizzled cowman's attention was to yank his shirt tail out.

"I wish you'd kinda wean yourself uh yankin' at a man's shirt thataway, Sorrel. It's a hell of a habit fer a growed up man to git into."

"I've got a pair of boots in my trunk. It's at the stage depot where you found me."

Wild Horse Holliday grunted and stooped to pick up a rusty horseshoe near the hitchrack. He spat on the horseshoe and grinned wickedly.

"Mayor Silas Shinn is a taller-paunched skinflint. Move over to one side a little, Sorrel. I ain't had so much fun since I was a yearlin'!"

He was winding up like a big league pitcher when a wailing scream announced the panting and mottled jowled approach of the mayor of Red Coulee. Si Shinn was running as fast as his short legs and unaccustomed high heeled boots would allow, and waving a bunch of keys in a pudgy hand. A crowd was gathering. There were cheers.

The mayor's breath came in wheezing sobs as his unsteady hands shoved a trembling key at the locked door.

"You smoke too many of them five center cheroots, Si." Wild Horse Holliday spat on the rusty horseshoe, squinted his eyes, and tossed the horseshoe back across his tall shoulder. There was the crash and tinkle of shattered glass. The thrown horseshoe had gone through the upper glass partition of the store's door, carrying with it the cardboard sign that said, "Closed," and missing Si Shinn's bent head by inches.

"It should be ag'in the law," said Wild Horse Holliday, "closin' a store in daytime. We're takin' our trade down the street, Silas."

He took Livingston Jones by the arm and the cheering crowd made a lane for them. Behind them sounded the wheezing wail of the cow-town's pudgy little mayor.

Wild Horse Holliday asked Livingston Jones, "Ever ride your horse into a saloon, Sorrel?"

The lanky, freckled young tenderfoot grinned uncertainly and shook his red head. There was a new glint in his gray eyes.

"Never," he confessed.

"In my day, son, we never went into a likker saloon no other way."

★

WILD HORSE HOLLIDAY pointed to a huge banner the enterprising citizens had stretched between the Hotel and the Mercantile: "Welcome to Red Coulee! It's Your Town, Cowboys!"

"They hadn't orter post such signs unless they mean it, Sorrel. We're takin' 'em at their word. Let your spurs out to the town hole an' holler." He tilted back his head and howled like a wolf. Saddled horses at the hitchracks reared and lunged and pulled back. Bridle reins broke. A couple of Rail R horses stampeded down the wide, dusty street, stirrups popping, broken reins flapping, clouds of dust billowing behind them.

Wild Horse Holliday said that would learn them damn fools not to tie a horse by the bridle reins. And a real cowhand put his horse in the barn for feed before he tanked up on forty rod.

The stage depot was closed; somebody had locked the door. Wild Horse Holliday kicked at the flimsy lock and the door swung open.

There was a battered steamer trunk that wore a lot of foreign labels pasted on it. Livingston Jones unbuckled the heavy straps and fumbled in his pants pocket for his keys.

"No," he shook his head when Wild Horse Holliday reached for his six-shooter to shoot off the lock. "Wait. I got a better way." He reached out his other long arm.

"Dang it all, Sorrel, quit poppin' my shirt tail!"

Livingston Jones fund his keys just in time to save the lock. He threw the lid of the trunk back, and pulled out a pair of polished tan polo boots and white tailored polo breeches. Both boots and breeches had seen hard use.

"Where's the whip?" asked the cowman.

"Whip?"

"Shore. To go with the dude boots an' ice cream panties. The long whip you use to pop when them white Perch'ons lope slow aroun' the circus rig and the purty little gal in the pink tights rides their broad backs, with the spangles shinin' an' the band a-playin'. You bin holdin' out on me, son. When's the circus comin' to town?"

Livingston Jones had some difficulty convincing the grizzled cowman that he wasn't the "bill poster feller" for some circus. He stripped and pulled on the

white breeches and polo boots and a white lightweight jersey with a blue A on the front. His long freckled arms with their lean muscles showed below the short half-sleeves. He took the gold and black braid from a service scarred Army campaign hat and put it on his rusty wiry haired head, slipping the thin leather chin strap under his lean jaw. This new outfit changed his appearance.

Wild Horse Holliday wanted to know what the A on his sweater meant.

"Army," Livingston Jones flushed a little. "West Point. I—I didn't finish."

He pulled off the sweater and selected a clean white shirt which he put on. And exchanged the army hat for the now soiled panama he had been wearing.

"I'd almost forgotten," he said, and the reckless glint died like a spark in his gray green eyes. "Woozy." Livingston Jones shook off some invisible weight from his lean shoulders and forced a twisted grin. "You said something about riding into a saloon for a shot of booze, Wild Horse."

He dropped the lid of the trunk, closed the door with the shattered lock and followed the lanky cowman down the wide street towards the big red livery barn.

Ten minutes later Wild Horse Holliday and Livingston Jones rode into the crowded hotel saloon, drank from the bottle and rode out again through the swinging half doors waving bottles of beer.

Wild Horse Holliday's grin had a hard twist. He was watching the way the tall, almost skinny pilgrim sat his horse. Others were watching that same thing. And by the time the pair of oddly teamed celebrants had unsaddled and stabled their horses, there was some Pool money being wagered that Wild Horse Holliday's pilgrim would win the bronc riding.

Wild Horse Holliday and Livingston Jones decided that it would be a good idea to tamp down their likker with a bait of grub and they headed for the restaurant. The grizzled cowman was still chuckling over the look on the saloon man's face when they rode in. Livingston Jones wore a grin.

"Eyes bogged out like a toad-frawg's," said Wild Horse Holliday. "His hide purple as a wild plum. One of these times

You're sure in line for shaving joy
When you use Thin Gillettes, my boy!
These blades last long—four cost a dime—
You look well-groomed, save dough and time!
Top quality
at rock-bottom price
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10c
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

Fatty will bust like a toy balloon. Them quart a day men can't stand the pressure. Them new street lamps Mayor Si Shinn give to the town when they elected him are just a plain invite to a man's trigger finger. You got a hawg-laig, Sorrel?"

Livingston Jones halted and frowned down at his booted feet. "Weren't my legs tracking?"

"Smoke-wagon," explained the Texan. Shootin'-iron. Hawg laig."

"In my trunk. Army type."

"We'll git to it later. . . . Them danged street lamps. . . ."

Livingston Jones was getting the impression that Wild Horse Holliday disliked Mayor Si Shinn.

"The dadburned skinflint is in cahoots with Maxson an' the Rail R outfit to grab our li'l' ol' outfits. A little cowman is always in debt to fellers like Shinn, somehow, fer grub an' machinery er mebby a loan to winter his outfit when the bottom drops outa the market. He's got mortgage papers plastered on everything but gover'ment land. Slicker'n wagon grease. . . .

"Us Pool fellers shipped just recent. We're blowin' the proceeds from that train load of beef steers that topped the Chicago market. Drink it up er gamble it away before Si glaums onto it. . . ." Wild Horse Holliday's voice lost its drawl.

"And after you've squandered it?"

"Quien sabe? Hard to tell. When a big spread like the Rail R goes after a little feller it's like tryin' to put out a big prairie fire with tobaccer spit."

They were passing the Mercantile and Wild Horse Holliday's puckered eyes searched the ground for another horse shoe. Livingston Jones reached out a long arm as the cowman stooped, and yanked him erect with a tug on his shirt tail.

"I'll cut hand-holts in it," the grizzled Texan tucked in his shirt tail and led the way into the crowded restaurant.

He ordered two thick steaks and fried potatoes and a couple of cans of cold tomatoes and a bottle of rye whiskey to stir into the coffee to give it authority. He warned Livingston Jones against the dangers of sobering up too quickly. After all, the Red Coulee Round-Up happened only once every year.

Wild Horse Holliday was particular about moving their table so that he could sit with his back against the wall. A man had enemies, and drunk or sober, he liked to stay cautious. He grinned when he said his puckered blue eyes kept watching the door.

CHAPTER THREE

"In This Game Dudes Is Barred!"

NAMES of the bucking horses were printed on slips of paper that were dropped into a hat and stirred up. One by one the contestants entered in the saddle bronc riding, reached into the hat and drew the slip of paper with his bronc's name on it.

Most of the bucking stock was furnished by the big Rail R outfit. But the Pool had ten or a dozen bucking horses here, and all of them, Wild Horse Holliday said, were hard to set. If a Rail R man drew a bronc wearing that brand, he either had to swap for another horse or put back the slip and draw again. Because last year there had been a big ruckus when Maxson won first money on a big Rail R bronc called Brown Danger. Max had practiced on Brown Danger until he knew the bronc's every trick, and could ride him like a stick horse.

Today, Max Maxson drew a Pool bronc they called Rank Poison, the toughest bucking horse in the Pool string. The big Rail R ramrod grinned his approval. He'd scratch Rank Poison from his ears on back to his tail.

Livingston Jones drew a Rail R bronc called Bed Wagon. When the big bronc had been in the Rail R rough string, he had so crippled a few bronc-stompers that they rode the next few days on the round-up in the bed wagon.

"You drawed a warthawg, Sorrel," Wild Horse Holliday told him, "but ride 'im like I tell you, and you got 'im in your flank pocket. He's full brother to a mankiller called Helldiver that was condemned and pensioned off because he had a habit of turnin' a summersalt that drove the saddle-horn through a man's belly. Helldiver killed two good peelers an' crippled a few more before he got condemned. Both Helldiver an' Bed Wagon

are blacker'n the inside of a black hat. . . .

"Now listen clost an' I'll tell yuh how to bring home the bacon when you come outa the chute on that black Bed Wagon bronc. He's got more twists than a corkscrew an' when he sunfishes you kin reach down an' fan the grass with your hat. But he'll land on all four feet just when you swear he's goin' to turn over.

"If you loosen up then to quit 'im when he turns a cat, you're a goner, because he'll land sure footed as a mountain goat. You're loosened up, an' he throws you so high you've growed a white beard before you come down. All you got to do is start knockin' on 'im when the chute gate opens. Keep a-knockin' till the head timer—that's me—shoots in the air. Then let the pick-up man wean you away from your saddle. It's easy as shootin' fish in a rain barrel."

That clammy fear was crawling again inside Livingston Jones, and he shivered a little.

"You'd better tell your friends, Wild Horse, and follow your own advice. Don't bet on me. I never rode a bronc in my life."

"You'll ride the hair off Bed Wagon, son. What you need is a little snort of Fatty's forty rod, just before you come outa the chute a-scratchin'."

There were three judges and two timers, among whom was Wild Horse Holliday. He took Livingston Jones up into the high judges' stand with him, over the red-faced protests of Mayor Si Shinn who, with the local banker and the hotel manager, were the official president, treasurer and secretary of the Red Coulee Round-Up and the only men outside the judges and timers who were allowed to sit up there.

"It ain't every day," said Wild Horse Holliday, "that you got the honor of entertainin' a high-toned visitor from foreign lands. You sent the governor an invite, didn't yuh? Then what the hell! Sorrel's got a claw-hammer coat in his trunk. That trunk's bin all over the world. Set down, son. Unwrop that package I give yuh."

Before they left town to ride out to the rodeo grounds Wild Horse Holliday had somehow gotten into and out of the Mercantile. In the store's show window had been the display of rodeo prizes. A silver mounted saddle, a large silver and gold belt buckle, silver mounted spurs, and other trophies. And a large wooden key to Red Coulee painted with gilt and the lettering in bright red. It was the key that Mayor Shinn had planned to present to the Governor of Montana, with a carefully rehearsed and gestured speech.

The key came to light when Livingston Jones undid the wrappings. He was as astonished as the purple jowled Mayor Si Shinn.

"Whop 'im between his short horns with it, Sorrel, if he so much as looks cross eyed." Wild Horse Holliday took off his hat and waved it, howling like a wolf. Then bellowed down at Max Maxson who was the arena boss.

"Turn 'em out wild! What's holdin' yuh?"

It opened up with the first section of the saddle bronc riding. Riders thrown, dust swirled, and the crowd cheered in the packed grandstand. And every time a bronc came out of the chute, Livingston Jones held his breath. He gripped the big key to Red Coulee until the gilt and red paint stained the sweating palms.

There was calf-roping, bareback bronc-riding, team-tying steers. Then a trick riding act, bulldogging and wild cow milking. And the afternoon sun was lowering when Max Maxson announced through the big megaphone for all bronc riders in the last section of the bronc riding to get ready.

"Git down amongst 'em, Sorrel," said Wild Horse Holliday. "Two of the Pool boys will set your bear trap on Bed Wagon. Mind what I told yuh, now. Come out a-scratchin'. Fan 'is ears off."

Livingston Jones, knees felt wobbly as he gave the grizzled cowman a sickly grin and went down the steep ladder behind the bucking chutes.

★

THIS was it. That fear, which had been with him since he could remember, that was like a coiled rattlesnake inside. There had been a fear of drowning when he was a kid, until his kid sister fell into the lake and he had dived in after her, clothes and all, from

the deck of the lake steamer. He'd kept her and himself afloat until men in a rowboat picked them out of the water. The men had asked him what was the joke, because he'd been grinning and had his little sister over her drowning panic. After that he had entered all the swimming races in the lake and won a lot of them, because he had the long, whalebone build of a swimmer. . . .

And always there'd been that fear of fighting, until he had knocked out Nevada Joe Hunter. And other fears, some of them never beaten, and that kept cropping out at times. Men had seen it and called him a coward.

On cavalry maneuvers, only this last summer, a horse had piled up at the foot of one of those precipitous long slides. When his broken leg and a fractured arm were healed, he had been ordered to report to his troop commander. The result was an official letter that covered the dread word Cowardice with more official words:

". . . . lacking in proper qualities . . . and therefor unfitted. . . ." A damned yellow-bellied coward!

"Set this saddle on the ground, Sorrel. Try them stirrups for length." That was one of the Pool cowpunchers.

Livingston Jones sat down in the saddle on the ground and shoved his feet in the stirrups. The two Pool men lengthened the stirrups. He was wearing Wild Horse Holliday's silver-mounted spurs buckled on his polo boots. They didn't fit any too well. One of the Pool men asked him what sized boots he wore, and pulled off his own boots and made him swap.

The high heeled boots pinched his feet and he stumbled stiffly. His hands shook a little when he buckled on the silver mounted spurs Wild Horse Holliday was loaning him. He got them on wrong.

Nevada Joe Hunter, battered and half drunk, and some of his professional rodeo hands were standing nearby. Nevada Joe, despite his beating, had ridden a bad horse in the first section, and up till now the ride looked like day money. And he'd won the bulldogging by beating Max Maxson's time. Nevada Joe had what it took to make a world's champion cowboy, but whiskey brought out his ornery streak.

"If you're a dark horse, I'm a sheepherder. You don't even know how to wear a pair of spurs. That Helldiver bronc has killed two good men an' sent more to the hospital."

"He ain't ridin' Helldiver," grinned one of the Pool men. "He drawed Bed Wagon. And it's the Bed Wagon bronc he's ridin'."

"That's what he thinks." An ugly grin spread across Nevada Joe's battered face. "This dude might be Wild Horse Holliday's dark horse. But Max Maxson's dark horse is a black mankiller called Helldiver. The Rail R switched broncs. I hope you break your damned neck, *Mister* Jones."

Nevada Joe Hunter turned and walked away. He and his cronies were grinning when they pulled the cork on a quart bottle.

The two Pool men were saddling the big black bronc in the bucking chute, talking in low tones as they studied it.

"Not even the mare that was their mammy kin tell them two black geldin's apart. . . ."

"Git holt of Wild Horse Holliday. Tell 'im Max switched broncs. Turn this outlaw out."

"The next contestant," bellowed the man with the megaphone, "is none other than Sorrel Livingston Jones, the Dude from Nowhere. Comin' out on that notorious bronc, Bed Wagon; that's full brother of the mankillin' Helldiver, an' he's got all the Diver's ornery tricks. Hang onto your hats, folks!"

The two Pool men looked worried. They were arguing, bewildered, about unsaddling the big black bronc and turning him loose. They could not get the attention of Wild Horse Holliday up in the judges' stand. But they could see big Max Maxson out there in the arena sitting his horse and talking to the two pick-up men.

Max was grinning, then he stood in his stirrups and shouted. "Where's Jones? Did he rabbit on us?"

Livingston Jones was sick inside. He climbed the chute. One of the Pool men shoved a pint of whiskey at him and told him to take a drink. He shook his head and almost lost his balance as he climbed awkwardly over the chute and let himself

down into the saddle. Cold sweat beaded his chalky face. One of the Pool men shoved the thick soft white halter rope into his hand and the other man asked him if he had both his stirrups. Near the chutes he heard some man's voice saying, ". . . .Helldiver, shore as shootin'."

Livingston Jones felt the big black bronc bunch up under him; felt the quivering power of the horse between his long legs.

"All set, Sorrel?"

Livingston Jones tried to say something but he had lost his power of speech. His knees were shaking and weak and his heart thumped against his ribs. It was like one of those horrible fear-ridden nightmares, and he'd wake up. . . .

He must have nodded, and the nod was mistaken for a signal, for the chute gate was jerked open. The big black bronc crouched, then quite the chute with a twisting, lunging jump, squealing as its four feet hit the ground with a jarring thud that snapped Livingston Jones' head back. His long legs swung forward then back of their own accord, as the black bronc pitched again, squealing. And mingled with the bronc's squeal sounded that wild wolf howl from the judges' stand.

Ahead of his saddle horn was a tangled, tossing black mane. The bronc's neck was bent low and its head was down. All the rider could see was blurred ground that rose and fell like a dirty storm-tossed lake.

Livingston Jones grabbed his Panama hat and hung onto it. He didn't know he'd yanked the hat off his head. He gripped it and the pitching of the horse wrenched his outflung arm in its socket. He was out of the saddle but his feet were still shoved deep in the stirrups and his legs swung back and forth like pendulums.

His teeth clashed together as a spine-twisting thud threw him back into the saddle. His head snapped forward, then back, kinking his neck. His lips were twisted in a grimace of fear, and his eyes saw nothing but the heaving ground below. Ground that rose up suddenly and then was gone again. He gripped the halter rope in one hand, his hat in the other, long legs swinging. The whole world was rocking and heaving and pitching, and he was a cork tossed on a muddy lake. Then that reeling earth slammed into his face as his head crashed into the dirt, and his whole body was wrenched and twisted out of shape.

A .45 six-shooter cracked. Twelve hundred pounds of sweaty black bronc somersaulted over him. Then sudden darkness. . . .

★

LIVINGSTON JONES blinked open his eyes and saw Wild Horse Holliday, his face a dull gray, his eyes dancing with hard blue lights.

"Take 'er easy, Sorrel. My, them ice-cream britches of yourn is shore a mess! Take a swaller of this forty-rod. You rode 'im, son, plumb to the ground! Doc says he can't find no bones outa kilter. But your bronc broke 'is neck when he turned that cat!"

The raw whiskey was strong medicine, and Livingston Jones sat up slowly. They had carried him from the arena and in behind the bucking chutes and corrals and judges' stand. Slowly, carefully, he moved his arms and legs and pulled fresh air into his lungs.

His clothes were ripped and smeared with dirt and blood. His hands and face were skinned and bloody. He ached all over. But when his mind cleared, he grinned up at Wild Horse Holliday squatting beside him. Livingston Jones had done more than ride his bronc. He had ridden out that nightmare for keeps.

"I'd like," he said firmly, "to try another bronc."

Some man in the crowd muttered something about the devil in hell and red hot pitchforks! And what a hound for punishment!

"He just qualified when he rode Helldiver into the ground," said Nevada Joe Hunter, "and picked up the marbles. Now he's hollerin' for a re-ride."

There was a genuine grin on Nevada Joe's battered face as he carefully wiped off the neck of a pint bottle and handed it to Livingston Jones.

"It's rot-gut corn likker, mister. But it's my bottle and I'm proud to drink with yuh."

It was the rodeo cowboy's way of mak-

ing peace and Livingston Jones took a drink with him.

"And now," growled Wild Horse Holliday, "what's this about Max Maxson switchin' broncs on us, Joe? Who told you that was the Helldiver there in the buckin' chute?"

"Nobody," grinned Nevada Joe Hunter. "It was just one of them rodeo joshes to put the chill into a bronc rider's guts. Just a damned shabby, cheap trick, Holliday. But it didn't work. Your Sorrel feller rode that bronc like he owned 'im. Bed Wagon or Helldiver, he got rode."

The big, burly deputy sheriff shoved through the crowd. He had Max Maxson with him. The big Rail R ramrod's fancy clothes were badly mussed up and his nose was bleeding and he was groggy and scared looking. And he was wearing handcuffs.

The crowd of contestants, even some of his own Rail R cowhands, were eyeing Maxson with cold murderous anger.

"The boys was workin' 'im over," said the burly deputy, "when I huled 'em off him. What's the charges ag'in 'im?"

"If Sorrel had bin killed," said Wild Horse Holliday, "the charge could have bin murder."

Fear showed in Max Maxson's pale eyes. "If I was put under oath, Wild Horse, I couldn't swear fer certain which bronc it was that broke its neck out yonder. Last week somebody left the gate open where we had Helldiver in with a bunch of pensioned cow ponies. He got into the remuda. And there was them two big black broncs, Helldiver an' Bed Wagon. If any man kin tell them two broncs apart, I'll give 'im the Rail R outfit!

"Me'n the horse wrangler an' a couple of the boys looked 'em both over for a long time, arguin' which bronc was Helldiver. The only way to tell the Diver from Bed Wagon was to ride 'em both out. The one that lost his footin' when he pitched an' cartwheeled would be the Helldiver. Nobody wanted to make that kind of a trial ride. So we just cut one of them black twins into the pension pasture and agreed to keep our mouths shut. And so help me, misters, that's the truth."

Whiskey had loosened the horse-wrangler's tongue and he had spread the story there at the rodeo grounds. It had given Nevada Joe the ugly idea of throwing a scare into Livingston Jones, not knowing that the red headed dude was already half paralyzed with fear. And that was that.

"Take the 'cuffs off 'im," Wild Horse Holliday told the deputy. "He'd just stink up your jail."

★

WHEN the steel handcuffs were removed the crowd let Max Maxson go through. Nobody spoke to the Rail R ramrod. From now on he would always be the man who had substituted a mankiller bronc for another bucking horse.

When the cow-country condemns a horse for an outlaw, that horse has to be really bad. Maxson should either have cut both big black broncs into the pension pasture or told the truth about it before the bronc had been ridden. To let a man ride a mankiller without telling him what he was up against, was a low-down trick that the cow-country could never forget or forgive.

The Rail R cowpunchers were already decided. They said openly that they'd rather herd sheep than punch cows for Maxson.

They were giving the dead bronc a fitting burial. And Livingston Jones told Wild Horse Holliday that there were two things he wanted to do. Put up a monument to mark the grave of the Helldiver, and ride the Bed Wagon bronc.

Riding that black bronc that had been cut into the pension pasture should, he said, decide the argument. If the bronc kept its feet, bucked itself out without turning over, then he was, beyond all shadow of a doubt, the Bed Wagon. If he turned over, then the cowhands would have something besides the weather to talk about this winter.

"But I've got to ride that other black bronc, Wild Horse."

"Not today, son."

Wild Horse Holliday had seen Max Maxson mount his horse and head towards town at a long lope. And he'd watched Mayor Si Shinn get into his buckboard and drive off in the same direction.

"Let go my shirt tail, Sorrel. I got chores to tend to. You stay here an' help Nevada Joe kill that bottle of panther juice."

"Just a minute, Wild Horse. When I got off the stagecoach, you were the only man in Red Coulee who didn't either laugh at me or treat me like I had smallpox. You greeted me like a brother Elk. Why?"

"You was standin' there, son, fer all the world like an orphan calf at a round-up. First off, when I entered you in all them events, it was a josh to bother Si Shinn. Then I kinda cottoned to yuh. You had guts. What ails yuh, boy? You're blushin' like an old maid that's bin hugged in the dark by mistake."

"Nobody," said Livingston Jones, "ever said that before—that I had guts."

"Then you bin travelin' is shore blind company. Now if you'll turn loose of my shirt tail. . . ."

git officially presented to you at the big dance tonight. Mayor Shinn does the presentin' an' makes a speech, providin' he ain't sick a-bed by then. Si Shinn is a mighty sick man right now."

"Sick?"

"Where it hurts the worst fer him—his bankroll. Him an' Max Maxson is closer'n the Siamese twins. They bin in cahoots since Maxson taken over the Rail R outfit. There's two-three-half a dozen remnant brands Si bought out. Max has bin brandin' lots of cattle into them irons. Them calves grow into steers and the steers git sold on the Chicago market.

There was ten-twelve carloads in the last Rail R shipment. That money you seen Max bettin' was his cut of the proceeds. Si banks his cut. Now Maxson's played his string out. He's got to quit the country or be shamed off his own range or mebbyso killed by some feller that don't like snakes. So Si Shinn loses his

THERE'S A REASON why real working cow-hands vote overwhelmingly for the stories of Walt Coburn—who was ranch-born, raised in the saddle and knows his cow-folks! No Western fiction fan will want to miss Walt's next dramatic cow-country saga which will be printed in the March STAR WESTERN! Reserve it today—pick it up at your newsstand Feb. 11th!

"That was the only reason you had for befriending me, Wild Horse?"

"I was havin' town fun, Sorrel—joshin' a dude. You kin haul off now an' whop me one. I damn near got you killed. If that black bronc had killed you, well, I hate to think about how I'd be feelin' right now and from then on. Lower'n a snake's belly, young feller. I'd be shore proud to have you haul off an' whop me."

Livingston Jones let go the grizzled Texan's shirt tail and told him to tuck it in or let it flop. That he was going along.

The rodeo was over. The crowd was yelling for the dude Sorrel Jones, so he had to ride out and take their cheers. And then he headed for town with Wild Horse Holliday.

"We'll collect what bets we won, Sorrel. And then we'll stand there in front of the Mercantile an' look at that silver mounted saddle and champion bronc rider buckle an' the other prizes you won. They

goose that lays the gold aigs, unless the Rail R owners hire another crooked ramrod. Which ain't likely if they git their eyes opened. So Mayor Shinn of Red Coulee has a bellyache that nothin' kin cure."

"Who ramrodded the Rail R before they hired Max Maxson?" asked Livingston Jones.

"Me. Ol' Wild Horse Holliday. But I got along too good with them little outfits. Helped 'em gather their cattle an' branded their calves on the round-ups. Treated their reps right. We got along.

"Some fellers back in Chicago own the Rail R. They don't savvy the cattle business too good. It's big dividends they want. And they don't give a damn how many little outfits is crowded to the wall an' wiped out, so long as the big Rail R gits their ranches. I run the Rail R fer a good many years. Made 'em enough money. But when it come to land grab-

bin' an' gun-whippin' the little fellers, I balked.

"They put in Max Maxson to do their dirty work. I had my own li'l' ol' two-bit spread, and I didn't steal it. But Si Shinn an' the Rail R has just about got me hamstrung. That's why I was celebratin' when I sighted you. Havin' my last big wolf howl at Red Coulee. And when I'm done paintin' Red Coulee, I'm ridin' away from it fer the last time. . . .

"But now I'm playin' a hunch. And don't hang onto my shirt tail, son. Stay plumb away from me when we git to town. Because this is one game where dudes is barred."

Wild Horse Holliday slid his wooden handled six-shooter from its holster, spun the cylinder to examine its loaded chambers, and shoved it back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rail R Showdown

MAX MAXSON was and always had been a high-stake gambler, and there are times when such a gambling man has to toss the risks into the discard and play a bobtail flush like they were all aces.

He took another last drink and threw the empty bottle into the sagebrush, but the bad taste of humiliation and defeat still was gall in his mouth. Wild Horse Holliday and that damned dude had finished him. He hoped he'd get a chance to shoot them on his way to the Outlaw Trail. Because that's where the sign pointed now.

But he wasn't hitting that renegade trail to its South America end with empty pockets—not Fancy Max. He had 'er made. It was all there, waiting for him to pick it up, at Red Coulee. He grinned back across his shoulder and slowed down to a shuffling running walk to let Mayor Si Shinn's buckboard catch up.

Shinn's sweat streaked face was mottled. His voice squeaked with pent-up fury. "You've made a mess of things, Maxson!" his voice shrilled through the rattle of his buckboard wheels. "What you going to do?"

"Clear out, Silas. And you'll stake me. I'll meet you at the store. I've got to collect a bet from Fatty after I change horses. Then I'll drop in on you. Have ten thousand in cash. I'm lettin' you off easy. I know you do your own bankin', so don't tell me you haven't that much cash in your safe."

"You can't do this to me, Maxson! It's robbery!"

"What'll it be if I write a letter to Chicago that'll send you to the pen for helpin' me steal Rail R cattle? I've got it on you, Silas. Ten thousand bucks, Silas, on the line—if you want to keep on as mayor of Red Coulee. See yuh later."

Max Maxson loped on ahead. He had changed to a fresh horse by the time Shinn turned his team over to the barn man.

Max Maxson stopped at the long hitch-rack in front of the hotel saloon. There was a carbine shoved in his saddle scabbard and he was riding the top circle horse in his string of Rail R horses. His spurs jingled as he strode through the swinging half doors into the empty barroom.

Fatty was asleep in a big armchair at the front end of the bar, a newspaper over his face. He pawed it aside at the sound of Maxson's voice.

"Come out of it, Fatty! Pay-day! I'm collectin' the bets I won on the bronc ridin'. Two thousand from Wild Horse Holliday, and a few bets the Rail R boys laid. Hurry it up, Fatty. I got to get back to the grounds."

Fatty rubbed his sleep-bleared eyes and shook his bald head. He got a bottle and two glasses and set them on the bar.

"I'm holdin' them stakes, Max, till the losers git here. You ain't in that big a rush. Have a drink, an'—put up that gun, Max! You locoed drunk?"

"Open that safe, Fatty. Pronto. This is a hold-up!"

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? I ain't ready to die. It ain't my money, nohow. Don't shoot me in the back, Max."

Fatty wheezed as he opened the safe. Then Maxson was behind the bar, shoving the paunchy saloonman aside. He had an empty gunnysack in his hand and he dropped the money into it, emptying the safe with its sheafs of money marked with the names of bettors.

"I bet there's three-four thousand dollars you got there, Max." His bleared eyes blinked. "Don't do that, man!"

Maxson grinned flatly and the barrel of his six-shooter thudded down on the fat man's bald head. Fatty let out a grunting sigh and rolled over on his back in front of the open safe.

He went over the bar with a leap, still holding the sack in one hand, his gun in the other. He ran across the street just as Mayor Si Shinn was unlocking the door of his Mercantile. Shinn's eyes widened as he saw the gun in Maxson's hand.

"In we go, Silas!" Maxson was breathing hard. "Move fast if you want to stay alive!"

"Don't hurt me, Max!"

"Shut up. Open that cracker box."

Shinn's big safe was at the back of his store. He was almost trotting on his short legs now. His pudgy hands shook as he twisted the dial to work the combination. His lips moved as he recited the numbers of the combination, and his voice was a frightened, whispering sob.

Maxson's gun-barrel prodded him aside when he swung open the safe door. Then the big Rail R ramrod was stuffing sheaf after sheaf of banknotes into the gunny-sack.

"Ten thousand, Max. No more. You said ten thousand. Oh, you double crossin' snake, Maxson! You're robbing me! You can't do this to me! Help! Help!"

Shinn's voice was a high-pitched, shrill scream. He broke away from Maxson's grip and ran like a scared, screaming rabbit towards the front door.

The gun in Maxson's hand roared, echoing like a cannon in the empty store.

Mayor Si Shinn pitched forward onto his face and lay groaning, agony and fear in his eyes.

Maxson jerked a whang leather string around the mouth of the bulging gunny-sack. He had to jump over Shinn's paunchy bulk on his way to the door. Then he yanked open the front door and started across the street.

Two other saddled horses stood at the hitchrack where Maxson's horse stood, bridle reins dropped. Both horses belonged to Wild Horse Holliday. The dude Jones had ridden one of them at the rodeo grounds. . . .

WILD HORSE HOLLIDAY and Livingston Jones were inside the saloon. The red-headed Jones had insisted on tagging along after they'd had seen the Rail R horse at the hitchrack.

There was the bar bottle and two clean glasses, but no Fatty standing behind the bar. Nor any sign of Max Maxson. Then Livingston Jones had pointed to the open safe and to Fatty's feet and legs on the floor. When he had vaulted the bar, Fatty groaned and rolled over.

Then from the Mercantile across the street had come the sound of a gun.

"Stay where you are, Sorrel!" Wild Horse Holliday's voice cracked like a whip as he slid his six-shooter from its holster and headed for the short half-doors.

Livingston Jones grabbed a bucket partly filled with water and threw it on Fatty's head and face.

"Maxson!" sputtered Fatty. "Stuck me up. Robbed the safe. Knocked me on the head. Fetch me a drink. Make it a bottle. . . ."

But Livingston Jones was vaulting the bar. He saw the tall, bowlegged Wild Horse Holliday go through the short doors. Heard the heavy crash of guns. Then the grizzled Texan fell backwards and went down, his smoking gun in his hand.

Livingston Jones moved faster now than he had ever moved in his life. For once, there was no time to be afraid. He grabbed the smoking six-shooter from the floor and ran, crouching, out onto the wide plank sidewalk.

A bullet whined past his head. He saw Maxson, a smoking gun in his hand, mounted on his horse, and Jones shot without aiming. He shot again as Maxson reeled in his saddle. There was no need for a third shot, for Max Maxson was dead when he hit the ground. The tall tenderfoot knew that. He had been the crack pistol-shot at West Point. And he had killed the man who had shot down the one and only friend he had found at Red Coulee.

Livingston Jones did not take the trouble to look again at Maxson's body there in the dusty street. He was back in the saloon, on his knees beside the fallen old

Texan. With hands that shook, he was wiping blood from the thick Wild Horse Holliday's gray mane.

Jones called Fatty to fetch water and clean towels. He was feeling the cowman's chest and belly and back for more wounds when the croaking voice of Wild Horse Holliday sounded in his ears.

"Fer the last an' final time, Sorrel, quit pullin' at a man's shirt tail!"

Save for the bullet that had creased his skull, Wild Horse Holliday was unhurt. The doctor dressed the wound and told the cowman to stay sober and take things quiet.

Before he died, Mayor Si Shinn confessed to his part of the cattle rustling. By rights, the money Maxson had stolen belonged to the Rail R outfit. Because Shinn was afraid to die, his death was not a quiet one. And he left nobody behind to mourn his passing.

Livingston Jones was not arrested for the killing of Max Maxson.

Red Coulee celebrated that night. Wild Horse Holliday presented Livingston Jones with the silver-mounted saddle and belt buckle trophies for the bronc-riding. Nevada Joe Hunter made a speech in which he called Sorrel Jones the world's champion cowboy. Red Coulee claimed him now and forever as the town's hero.

It was Wild Horse Holliday who presented Sorrel Jones for a second time with that gold, red-lettered key to Red Coulee, "to take back East and show all them dudes."

Livingston Jones, dressed in a clean flannel shirt, a pair of levis, and new shop-made boots that were the gift of Nevada Joe who swore they were too small for him, got little chance to talk. And when the dance started he was swamped with pretty girls who did not wait to be asked.

★

IN THE crimson dawn, a little tipsy and light headed, sitting his silver-mounted saddle and forking the horse Max Maxson had not lived to ride along the Outlaw Trail, he rode out of town with Wild Horse Holliday. They emptied their guns at the sky and slowed their horses to a running walk.

Wild Horse Holliday twisted a corkscrew into the neck of a bottle. The Red Coulee Round-Up was over, and the grizzled cowman was taking Sorrel home with him. To stay a week or so, he said, until the big Rail R outfit sent a new ramrod out to take away his little outfit.

"While it still belongs to me, Sorrel, it's yourn. . . . Don't do that, dang it. Yankin' a man's shirt tail! I ain't deef. What was it you was stutterin' about?"

"The Rail R outfit," said Livingston Jones. "Since I first got to Red Coulee, I've tried to tell you. . . . When you first met me and asked me my name and took me in tow, I thought you knew, then I began to realize you didn't. I have a letter of introduction and other credentials in my trunk. I had some fool notion of first making good on my own, before I sprung the documents.

"You see, my uncle owned controlling interest in the Rail R, then bought out the other stockholders. When he died, I was his only heir. So you see, Wild Horse, that makes me the owner of the Rail R outfit. . . . I hope it won't make any difference. I—I mean, you and me being pardners. I don't know anything about running a big cow outfit. You've got to take the ramrod job and a half int'rest in the whole thing.

"Give those other Pool ranchers back their ranches and livestock. Sort of clean a dirty slate, like you cleaned mine in the past twenty-four hours, when you showed me I wasn't a coward. I want to tell you about it. I never told anybody before.

"My dad and mother both died when I was a kid. There was only my uncle, and a kid sister and private schools. She'll like it out West. . . . I mean it's hard to tell anybody that you've been a damned coward all your life. If you'll throw in with me for a pardner, maybe we'll get Red Coulee painted again next year. And I want to ride that other black bronc. And learn to howl like a wolf."

Wild Horse Holliday got the cork out of the bottle. He kept shaking his grizzled head.

"Mebby that bullet kinda knocked me locoed. Or I bin on a worse toot than I re'lized. Let's take a slow drink. Then you talk, and fer once I'll listen without you yankin' my shirt tail. I want to see

did I hear it straight, about you ownin' the Rail R. That part could be the truth. And if it is, son, then it's got a shore enough white man at the head. And I'm proud to work fer you or with you. But don't never try to make Wild Horse Holliday or Red Coulee believe there's the sign of a yeller streak down that back of yourn. Now let's make this a slow 'un."

* * *

The big black bronc they ran in from the pension pasture bucked off Livingston Jones four times, but never turned a cartwheel. He wouldn't let Nevada Joe Hunter, now the Rail R bronc-peeler, ride the big black bronc that had to be Bed Wagon.

"I'm going to gentle that Bed Wagon geldin'," Sorrel Jones told Nevada Joe and Wild Horse Holliday. "Make a cowhorse out of him."

Sorrel Livingston Jones made good that promise. And his pardner Wild Horse Holliday kept a secret promise he made to himself.

The Commandant at West Point got a bulky envelope. It contained newspaper clippings, photographs, signed testimonials that somewhat profanely and bluntly stated that Livingston (Sorrel) Jones was a fist-fighting, bronc-riding, gun-slinging warthog. And what the hell ailed the brains of any man, in or outside of Uncle Sam's Army, who claimed that Livingston (Sorrel) Jones didn't have guts?

And when, in due time, an official letter arrived at the Rail R headquarters ranch in Montana offering a second lieutenancy in the U.S. Cavalry to Livingston Jones, it came as a surprise.

Sorrel Jones of the Rail R outfit declined, with proper thanks, that which Cadet Livingston Jones had so bitterly lost.

But he framed the letter and commission. And hung them on the log wall of his bunkhouse at the Rail R home ranch.

Wild Horse Holliday claims that Sorrel Jones has what it takes to make a real cowhand. And that grizzled Texan is a good judge of horses, cattle, likker and real men.

THE END

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Duke Bagley—Gunsmoke

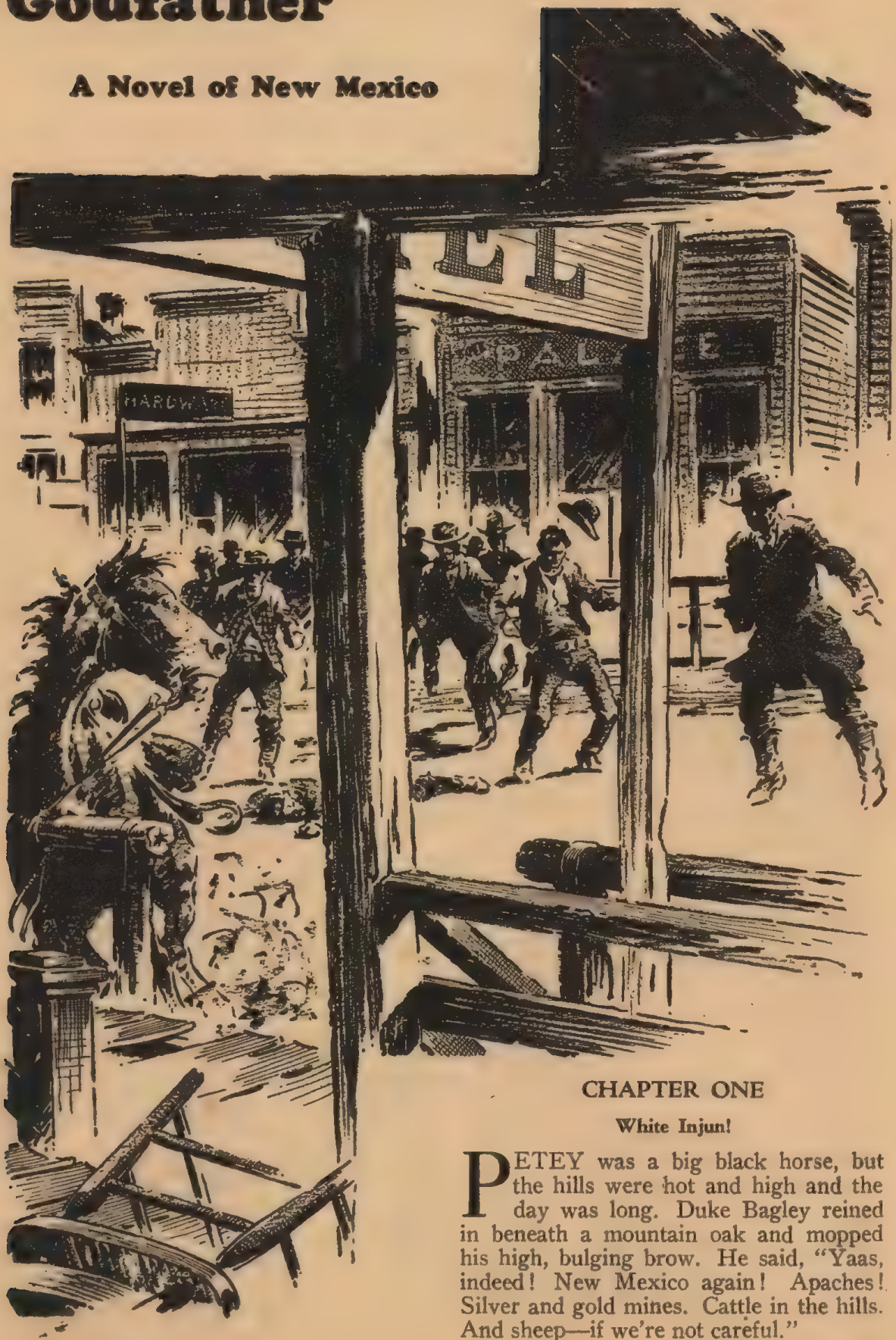
By William R. Cox

It was like that lovable rapscallion, Duke Bagley, to do you a good turn—and then reward himself by gently lifting your wallet. . . . So a hunted orphan, a town gone bronc, and a hidden fortune in bloodstained silver seemed heaven-sent for his special and deadly talents.

"Always knew I'd have to kill him," Bud said coolly. . . .

Godfather

A Novel of New Mexico



CHAPTER ONE

White Injun!

PETEY was a big black horse, but the hills were hot and high and the day was long. Duke Bagley reined in beneath a mountain oak and mopped his high, bulging brow. He said, "Yaas, indeed! New Mexico again! Apaches! Silver and gold mines. Cattle in the hills. And sheep—if we're not careful."

Petey snorted. The Duke's aquiline and slightly reddened nose sniffed at a slight breeze. He wore chaps and a woolen shirt too heavy for the day. His corpulency was more flesh than fat, but the heat told upon him now that he was past forty-five. He was a giant of a man with gauntleted, slender hands and small feet in immaculate stitched boots hand-made in Texas. His bold eyes were hooded and his sparse hair receding. He said, "No sheep here. Now where are those confounded Apaches?"

It was quite in keeping that the Duke was looking for Indians instead of the redskins questing for the Duke. Many years ago there had been bloody passages between Duke and a certain chieftain of the Mimbrenos, a tall Apache named Juan Tejille.

Time had buried the differences and Juan was now trapping for skins, and Duke was loaded with money, for a market in El Paso would pay him a profit worth the taking. Down in the town of Luball was a pack horse to tote the skins, and in Duke's saddlebag was a bottle of Blue Grass Bourbon to cement the deal.

It remained only to locate Juan Tejillo in a place where the Indian agent or his spies would not witness the transaction. Indian agents did not approve of whiskey for redskins nor of deals which did not pay a profit to Indian agents, Duke was well aware.

Petey, bending his neck, decided to crop a tuft of mountain grass. His decision being sudden, the Duke swayed a bit in the saddle and said, "Whoa! My black-hided, hard-headed, four-footed friend, you are looking for. . . ."

There was a plunking sound, the echo of a rifle shot, and from a nearby tree piñon nuts showered on the ground. Duke followed suit in one swooping dive, not forgetting to snatch his rifle as he went. He whistled once and Petey, losing interest in the tempting grass, galloped swiftly away and hid himself behind a rock.

Duke sought the inadequate trunk of a tree. His rifle sought a mark in the hill opposite him, from whence the bushwhacker's shot had come. There was no sound, no sight of an attacker. Duke swore and mumbled, "Them damned Injuns! A man can't trust them a minute. Now they figure to get paid without deliverin' the skins. Yaas, indeed! The red-livin', double-dealin'. . . ."

He moved from the tree, risking life and limb, running with more speed than such a large man would be expected to show, gaining the shelter of an outcropping of rock. Two rifle balls sought him, uncomfortably close, but he was unhit.

He went around the rock and found a toehold and grunted, hitching himself upward. He shoved the rifle ahead, reached a tough root and hauled himself onto a sort of shelf.

Once up there, it was worth it. Duke remained very still for perhaps a half hour. Petey had sense enough to stay out of sight, if within hearing.

Something moved on the hill. Duke's slim hands were steady on the rifle. If Juan Tejillo wanted to play war, the Duke was angry enough to give it to him.

A figure emerged from a clump of cottonwood trees. It crouched for a moment, staring across the valley at the place Duke had disappeared. Then it unfolded, standing erect, lounging a little, gun at trail.

And Duke took his finger off the trigger. His mouth dropped open. His assailant was not Juan Tejillo. It was a white lad, not over sixteen!

He was a gangly youth, with coltish arms and legs. He rolled a cigarette and stayed in the shade of the trees, as though waiting for someone. He seemed no longer interested in the Duke of Petey. The Duke gave vent to his indignation in a low, soundless whistle. The lad sat down, cross-legged, like an Indian, and smoked contemplatively.

From afar came the cry of a cat-bird. The boy gathered his feet under him, put his hand to his mouth and repeated the call. The Duke wiped a stream of sweat from his brow and saw with amazement the small parade of coppery skinned men who came through the pass and up the hill to the cottonwoods. The boy sat down again without relinquishing his cigarette and the Indians gathered around him.

Duke whistled, aloud this time and piercingly, so that Petey came running. Duke swarmed into the saddle before the

black animal could halt. They slithered down the hillside and across the flat and up to the group near the trees.

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THE young white fellow stood up, staring. Juan Tejillo, stooped a little now, but still a head above his followers, stepped forward, grinning. His hand was upraised. He said, "La Cucuracha! Amigo!"

Duke sat in his saddle and looked down upon the Apache chief. He said, "Yaas, indeed! My old friend, the double-crossing Juan No-Good."

The Apache's face went wooden. "Something wrong?"

"That murderin' young thief over yonderly nearly shot my damned hide full o' holes!" thundered the Duke. "What the thunderation kinda deal is this, Juan? You want trouble with me?"

Juan Tejillo said with dignity and some trepidation, "Only to sell the hides, my friend."

The white lad said, "Aw, tell the fat old slug to go to hell! I thought he was a spy."

The blood mottled Duke's jowls, spread to his brow. He said dangerously, "Who is this young white-faced fool?"

Juan Tejillo's lined face was sad. "A boy. He does not like the town. He comes and stays with us. What can I do, my friend? Certainly, he is a wild one."

"You mean he'd *rather* be with you?" demanded the Duke.

The young chap had yellow hair and light blue eyes. He stepped past Juan and said, "How did I know you were the great Duke Bagley? You got a pot on you like an alderman. Why doncha light and shut up?"

Duke came down off the horse. He stood a moment, arms akimbo, his hazel eyes full upon this young hero. He heard Juan say resignedly, "They call him Bud Jas-per. The Apaches call him Chivava Oro. He is plenty no-good—except at shooting and hunting, and maybe stealing."

Bud Jasper said, "And keepin' other people's noses outa my business. I'm good at that, too!"

He wore a sixgun tied low, and he never took his eyes from the Duke's hands. Young as he was, he was as deadly and hardbitten as the toughest gunslinger in an El Paso bar, Duke thought.

The Duke removed three little red balls from the pocket of his buckskin vest. He murmured, "Waal, waal!" The truculence left him and he seemed again to be a fat man, half asleep. He drew off his gloves and his hands were white and soft. Bud Jasper started to turn contemptuously away.

Then the three little balls began to dance. Juan Tejillo exclaimed with

pleasure and the other Indians clapped like children. The Duke jiggled away, making a continuous red flash of the circling balls. Then he stopped them between his fingers; they became four red balls. They became three, then two, then one, then all the way back to four again, then back to one red ball which disappeared in thin air.

Bud Jasper's mouth hung wide open, his pale eyes growing rounder than saucers. The Duke made a quick step, shot out his left hand. He caught the youth by the shoulder, twisted him off balance. His right hand reached over and plucked forth the lad's gun, which he tossed to Juan. One more motion brought Bud Jasper down over the Duke's knee. The boy's own belt came snapping loose.

The Duke purred, "Yaas, indeed! This hurts me more than it does you—you ornery li'l, measly, puling no-good son!"

He raised his arm. There was no sound from Bud Jasper. He struggled once, recognized the strength of the muscles in the oak of an arm which held him. He remained motionless, his hat fallen off, long blonde hair hanging.

The Duke looked around. Juan Tejillo was blank-faced but his beady eyes showed his satisfaction. The other Indians were tittering. Duke's arm fell.

He set the boy upon his feet untouched by the belt. He said gravely, "You see how it's done? Yaas, indeed. Keep a civil tongue in your head hereafter. And ask questions before you shoot at gentlemen!"

The color slowly came back to Bud Jasper's face. He said calmly, "Good trick, all right. I guess you tote pretty powerful medicine . . . You better make your trade with these Injuns, Bagley. The agent got a tip from Luball that Juan was trapping—and not selling to him."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed." He spoke at length with Juan Tejillo. He broached the bottle of Bourbon. He agreed upon a price for Juan's furs, made a date for delivery upon the morrow. It was all over in a half hour and the Indians were going single file back towards their camp.

Duke looked at the boy. He said, "Yaas, indeed. We'll be goin' into Luball. Want to talk to you, you young whippersnapper." He reached for the drink he had saved for himself in the bottom of the bottle.

The bottle was empty. Duke took a deep breath and glared into the pale eyes of Bud Jasper. The kid smiled at him without guile. He said, "I sure needed a jolt. You kinda scared me with that strap. I couldn't a lived if them Apaches had seen you strappin' me."

Duke exhaled. He said, "C'mon to town! You need a haircut!"

Petey carried both of them, but not without resentment. They rode into Luball at dusk and went up to Duke's room to wash. It was then that Duke found his room had been ransacked in his absence. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

A Partner for Duke

LUBALL was a town with one street, but the street was jammed for a full mile with stores, saloons and even a city hall, complete with court room and jail. Silver and cattle combined to make Luball a place where a man could gather considerable pelf, Duke decided. He led his young charge into a restaurant and paid two dollars for ham and eggs with coffee blacker than his hat.

Bud wiped his mouth on his ragged sleeve and said in his customary cocky manner, "You'll be in trouble here. They got tricky men in this town."

Duke said, "Now looka here, Bud. Who are your folks? Where do you generally hang your hat?"

Bud's eyes went paler than usual, his young mouth twisted into a hard, straight line. He said, "My folks are dead. They say Apaches killed 'em. I know the Apaches good—and they never did. Juan wouldn't lie to me."

Duke looked around and saw that the restaurant was deserted. Lowering his voice, he said gently, "Tell the Duke about it, Bud."

The kid shrugged. "Nothin' to tell. My pop worked for Rafe Luball, owner of the Silver Trail mine. Rafe fired him and pa went prospectin' for a new lode in the hills north of the trail. He come in all

excited five years ago and drove mom up there with him in a light wagon. They was found up there."

"Scalped?" asked Duke.

"The Apaches don't take scalps!" said Bud scornfully. "They cut off ears!"

"I know, I know," murmured Duke. "I was just wonderin'. . . . sometimes people over-reach themselves."

Bud said bitterly, "Rafe Luball took up claims near where my folks was killed and hit a mother lode. It made him the richest man in New Mexico. He owns this town."

"Who takes care of you?" asked Duke curiously.

"Now who the hell would bother with me?" demanded the youth. "I'm ornery. I know it. If you wanta know, I take pretty good care o' myself!"

Duke said, "Since you were eleven?"

"Well," said Bud, flushing a little. "There was Hype Frazer, and Lissa."

Duke opened his eyes wide. "Hype Frazer? He's got a wife?"

"Had a wife. Lissa's his daughter," said Bud. "Hype runs the Palace Bar."

Duke said, "Old Hype! Yaas indeed. We shall repair to the Palace Bar."

Bud said shortly, "Don't wanna."

"Nevertheless," said Duke, his voice silky and smooth, "we shall see old Hype." His shout filled the restaurant as he suddenly bellowed, "And when I make a suggestion, don't you sit and sulk, you dim young nitwit!"

Bud came out of his chair staring, and before he could recover from the blasting abjuration, Duke was propelling him out of the restaurant and onto the main street of Lubball.

The Palace Bar was well situated and well patronized. Hype Frazer stood behind the mahagony and wiped with a soiled towel; a short chopping-block of a man with a sweeping mustache. There were some hard characters present, all new-comers in the land since Duke had disappeared eastward in the Sixties.

Hype's eyes fell upon the gangling Bud and he scowled, calling, "You Bud, C'mere!"

Bud shambled ahead, glowering. Duke bellied up to the bar and pinned the lad between him and a tall lean man in a black alpaca coat and pantaloons to match. Bud squirmed, but could not move. Duke said mildly, "I'll take Blue Grass Bourbon. A bottle."

Hype Frazer's hard eye shifted from the lad. He squinted, recoiled, eyeing Duke up and down. Then he said, "Bagley! Cucuracha! I'll be a son of a mule!"

They shook hands and the lean man seemed very interested. Hype said, "Mayor Weeper, this is an old friend o' mine, Jack Bagley. The Apaches call him Cucuracha because he was always crawlin' out from under a rock and killin' them."

"Duke Bagley," corrected the stout man. "I'm pleased to meetcha, Mayor Weeper. Lovely little town you got here, Mayor."

The lean man had eyes like black unburnt coals. He was completely expressionless and under his arm was a bulge which told of hidden hardware. He said, "I've heard of you, Bagley." He turned and pushed through the crowd, making his exit through swinging doors.

Duke murmured, "Yaas, indeed. Tore my room apart while I was out in the hills. Now the mayor don't like me. Nice little town, Hype!"

The barkeeper said, "Where'd you pick up Bud? He's been missin' for weeks."

Duke said, "Wanted to talk to you about that. Likely lad, Bud. Tough and slightly crooked, eh?"

Hype stared at the boy. "You been stealin' again? What'll Lissa say to you?"

Bud squirmed some more. Duke said, "He's a mean one, all right. Who's his guardian?"

Hype said, "We-ell . . . . Rafe Lubball, the bank says."

Duke exhaled smoke and a grunting, "Ugh!"

"But Rafe and his boy don't pay much 'tention to him. Young Bully Luball and Bud had trouble . . . . Bud was right, for once."

Bud was grinning a little, a hard, reckless grin, and a slight shudder went down Duke's back as he remembered that in this country another youngster had at the tender age of twelve killed his first man —and had reputedly killed twenty more by the time of his twenty-first birthday, and before lean Pat Garrett shot him in a

darkened room. Here, then, was an incipient Billy the Kid. . . .

Duke Bagley was far from saintly. There were things in his past which now, in his softer middle age, reached accusing fingers at him. Too many men had fallen at the point of Duke's flaming sixgun. Too much money had streamed over bars and across gaming tables, both coming and going, for Duke had played both sides always in his game with life. But there was something about this tough, resourceful youth which gave the Duke pause.

He was well heeled right now, due to a few little deals here and there. The trade with Juan Tejillo meant another small fortune. He could afford to indulge a whim in connection with a waif who slightly resembled the Jack Bagley of many years ago. . . .

Through the swinging doors of the Palace walked three men. One was the funereal mayor of the town. The other two were bulky figures, one middle-aged, one young. They had prominent bulbous noses and large mouths with fleshy lips. Their jaws were ponderous, their eyes heavy-lidded. They were alike as peas. They were, Duke realized instantly by the quiet which fell upon the room, the Lubballs; Rafe and Bully, father and son.

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THE bar cleared on either side of Duke and Bud. Hype Frazer flushed a little and his hands froze above the bung starter which hung from a leather thong. Hype Frazer was an oldtimer, Duke knew, a hardbitten son of the old frontier.

Two other characters disassociated themselves from the hangers-on who melted so swiftly, and stood obviously backing any play by the Luballs and the Mayor. One was wide and young and reckless and was called Acey Deucey. The other was the biggest man in the room, with hands like chunks of ore from the mines. He was known as Caliper.

Rafe Luball came and stood before Duke and Bud, hands on hips. He wore well-made town clothes and his manner was bold and confident. His son was attired in natty range clothing which did not conceal his bulky awkwardness and strength. Luball said harshly, "Young Jasper, you've gone too far this time. You're under arrest."

Duke's eye took in the silver star upon the checkered shirt of young Bully Luball, who could not have been over twenty-one or two. He chuckled to himself. Papa Luball was really running the town —mayor, officials and mines.

Duke said with amusement, "Can't the marshal make his own arrests?"

Acey Deucey and Caliper closed in a little. Bud shifted, hooking his elbows on the bar, leaving four feet between him and the Duke. The kid's eyes were colorless, expressionless, watching the five men. The room became very quiet.

Rafe Luball looked the Duke up and down and said, "You're not wanted in this town, Bagley. We know who you are."

Bully Luball was gaining confidence. He stepped one pace forward and snarled, "You're coming with me, Bud!"

The little red balls came out of Duke's vest and began a modest circle in his left hand. Rafe Luball blinked once then scowled furiously. "Make your arrest, son. This fat fool is nothing but a trickster."

Duke drawled, "You're right, sir. And what is the charge against the boy?"

"Stealing!" snapped Luball, loud enough for all in the Palace to hear. "Entering my house and stealing money from my desk!"

There was a slight pause. Then Bud said easily, "There wasn't any dough in the desk. And I was lookin' for proof that you stole my father's mine, you old goat!"

Luball's face went red, then totally white, like a sheet of parchment. Duke's red balls disappeared and his big Frontier Model was in his fist. Duke's voice went into its fullest bellow, "And maybe he found it! Take your damned lackeys and git, Luball! You're not arrestin' this boy!"

Bud's somewhat rusty gun was also out and pointing directly at Bull Luball. Acey Deucey and Caliper hesitated, their eyes upon Rafe. Never had two guns been drawn more promptly in the town. Yet it was apparent that in a shoot-out the Duke and the kid would have the worst

of it, even though they downed the Luball's. Acey Deucey and Caliper had them flanked.

Duke did not lower his voice. "Go ahead, brave men! Give your sheepherders the order! You can get us—if you want to pay the price!" His own weapon covered Rafe Luball and the mayor.

It was Mayor Weeper who broke the tableau. He whispered to Rafe. That white-faced gentleman managed to get his breath. He turned on his heel and stalked from the bar without another word. After a fraction of a second, his son and the two gunmen deputies followed him.

But Weeper was of another calibre. He faced Duke coolly, and said, "You'll have to get out tonight. You can take that worthless button with you. But at midnight your number goes up, Bagley. This is our town, you know."

Duke said, "Yass, indeed! I see it is your town. Lock, stock and barrel—and the Silver Trail. You had better tighten your grip, though, Mayor. I've seen towns slip away from folks before!"

The lean man shrugged and disdained to answer. His step was soft and catlike as he left the Palace.

Hype Frazer was muttering, "They got the bulge on us, Duke. They check and double check everything. Now you know who went through your bags."

"Yaas," nodded Duke amiably, "Gimme that whiskey, Hype. And give the kid sarsaparilla no matter what he says. . . . I never owned a town, Hype. And I never seen one I would rather take away from folks that I liked less!"

★

IT WAS morning in the house of Hype Frazer, a spacious adobe building with seven inch walls, cool and dim. It was too early for the Palace to be open and Duke stretched his long legs and sipped his host's good coffee and amusedly watched Bud Jasper.

A visit to the store—owned but not operated by Rafe Luball—had transformed the youngster. He wore new clean jeans of striped material, a plain blue flannel shirt, a gay rebosa and soft, double-stitched boots. He sported a new belt and gun. He sat and tried hard to be unconscious of these splendid habiliments, and would not let his gaze stray toward Lissa Frazer.

The bar owner's daughter was fifteen and as pretty as a little speckled pup, Duke thought approvingly. She had neat, clean limbs and moved with grace, setting forth breakfast. She was elaborately polite to Bud, who only mumbled his embarrassed replies.

Hype said, "Sure there is people don't like Luball. That's why he don't dare kill you in cold blood. But your name's on the list. Just because they haven't shot you yet don't mean they won't. . . . Besides owning the town, Luball owns that Indian agent, Wallaby, too. If you want to complete your deal you better do it today and cut a trail south."

Duke said, "Wallaby, I am informed, is a grasping, venal man, and a dyed-in-the-wool scoundrel who cheats the Apaches blind."

Luball takes care of the beef contracts at the Reservation," said Frazer moodily. "I tried to get in on it myself and couldn't. Luball's into everything they is."

"And people endure it because they feel whipped at the startin' post," nodded Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Seen it before, here and there."

Lissa set a steaming plate of hot cakes before young Bud and he dropped his fork, then his knife before he could organize himself to fall to. Duke jerked a

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thumb at the next room and Hype joined him there and closed the door.

Duke said, "What about the kid's parents?"

Hype spread his hands. "Tom Jasper had a fight with Rafe Luball. He quit the Silver and I think he found a bigger lode. The one Rafe's operatin' right now. But no one ever could prove it."

Duke said, "Bud thinks there's a paper or somethin'."

"He's a wild 'un," said Hype slowly. "Never had a chance, of course. He's headed straight for trouble. Breakin' into Luball's was a dumb kid play—although I don't believe he took anything."

Duke said, "I'm takin' him along for awhile. We'll be campin' in the hills if anything turns up. If you send a message, use the old word Cucuracha. If you could talk to the people against Luball—sorta keep 'em off, should anything start—it'd help."

Hype said, "Now don't do anything rash. I got my gal to think about. Rafe don't bother me too much. . . ."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed! Old Two-gun Hype! The tough old Border man!"

Hype flushed, growling, "Okay, Duke! But if my kid gets hurt. . . ."

Duke said, "She sure is pretty! Likes that Bud too much, eh?"

"Damn it, yes!" said Hype worriedly. "Wish you could make a man of Bud. . . . Bully Luball's about the only other youngster eligible hereabouts, and that's one reason Lafe don't bother me. Bully's sweet on Lissa."

"It's a fine plot," sighed Duke. "Ready-made for a bright and unassumin' man. Yaas, indeed. Be seein' you, Hype."

He watched Bud stammer good-bye to the girl, saw her flash one look from under long lashes that left the boy red and speechless. He chuckled and led the way down the main street of Luball. He said gently, "You got to speak up and wipe your mouth when you talk to gals. . . . Now look sharp. I expect some trouble, but not much. We're gonna pretend to run outa town."

Bud said, "Let those sheepherders run us out?"

"Let them think they do," nodded Duke. "Unless. . . . ain't that Acey Deucey over to the left?"

He shambled along, apparently not noticing anything, his hands idle at his sides. But, without glancing sideways, said, "And Caliper on the right."

Duke said, "And there is our mayor, straight ahead! Perhaps young Bully is at our backs. Walk straight for the hotel, my young whippersnapper. Heads up!"

The two went along without changing pace. The mayor paused at the steps leading into the Silver Hotel. The two gunmen on either side of the street waited and watched. From the second story of the bank building Rafe Luball looked down, rifle in hands. One false move, the Duke knew, and there would be two corpses in the streaming sunlight of mid-morning.

He paused on the steps, facing the lean and expressionless mayor. He said pleasantly, "Y'see we haven't left. We're still figurin' on takin' one or two with us if we get shot."

Mayor Weeper said, "But you are leaving now."

Duke put back his head and laughed heartily, "You knew we wouldn't stay and die, didn't you? Smart fella, indeed! Yaas, leavin' right now. And I'm takin' the youngster along. Any objections?"

"Not so as you take him far enough away," said Weeper grimly. "And mighty quick!"

Duke went up the stairs and said over his shoulder, "Keep the home fires burnin', Mayor. May see you again some day!" He saw the banked fires in the lean man's eyes and recognized an enemy of steel. He winked brazenly and added in a lower tone, "Maybe you won't always be workin' for an overbearin' thief like Luball!"

Weeper did not blink nor respond. Duke went into the hotel with Bud and packed his saddle bags. He patted the stuffed money belt around his capacious middle, took a good look at his sixgun and at the smaller revolver in his shoulder holster and went back down to pay his bill. Acey Deucey and Caliper were watching from a corner.

Out in the stable Petey whinnied, ready to go again. There was a red roan in the next stall, and a new Mexican saddle on a peg. Duke said carelessly, "That's your outfit, Bud. You and me are workin' together for now."

He turned complete attention upon Petey, pretending not to hear the stuttering thanks of the youngster. He was mounting when the gun exploded so close to him that he felt the heat of the flame.

CHAPTER THREE

Secret of the Silver Trail Mine

THE Duke's quickness was fabulous. His gun was out and he was crouching, peering through the smoke before the echoes of the shot died away. He was in time to see the man called Caliper bend forward, clutching his middle, a red stain maculating his hands, falling slowly toward the slim figure of Bud Jasper.

Bud said, "He was throwin' down on you, Duke. . . . He come in on tiptoe, and your back was turned. . . ."

Duke said, "Top your hoss! Ride like hell for Juan Tejillo's cache!"

For once the kid did not balk. He leaped into the new saddle like an agile monkey. His face was puckered and Duke saw that despite his bravado, the killing of a man had shaken the button. The spirited young horse flew out of the stable and headed directly for the hills in the blue distance.

The Duke swung up on Petey, and he rode out, swinging his gun. Acey Deucey and Mayor Weeper came hurrying from the front. Duke covered them and said, "Just had to shoot one of your friends. If you want me, you'll have to bring a posse and look hard. Caliper tried to get me in the back. You'll find my bullet in his belly!"

He dug his heels into Petey and they went away like a phantom horse and rider. There was a desultory shot or two, but Duke had seen in Weeper's face that the mayor had not sent Caliper to do murder. That had been a Luball deal.

There would be little or no organized resentment at the death of the gunman. Rafe Luball was a ruthless ruler, a despot, and such a man could not summon loyal forces without paying heavily. He had bought Weeper and some others—but the death of any one of his gunmen would not call for strenuous reprisals from the townsfolk.

And if Weeper and Luball rode into the hills, that would be fine. The Duke rode hard after the boy. His mind was already working over an idea. He had been forced to leave his pack pony in Luball. He could not at once consummate his deal with Juan Tejillo. But he could talk with the Indian chief.

He caught Bud Jasper at the cottonwoods where they had first met. The boy was pale but contained. He said, "Caliper was lookin' for it. I ain't proud I downed him, Duke. I always thought I'd be proud. But I ain't."

The Duke said, "I'm proud of you, Bud, not because you killed Caliper, but because you used your head afterwards, and took orders like a man. Now call Juan and see if he's around. He oughta be. . . ." He dismissed the death of Caliper, seeking to make the boy forget. He knew the price of remembering after a man died at the end of a gun. . . .

He frowned, wondering why he bothered. He had never taken a partner before in his life. He had barged into the affairs of many people, often to their advantage, and had always managed a profit for the Duke. But this was different. . . . It would be easy enough to procure horses or burros, clean out the buried peltries, pay off Juan and head south for El Paso and his profit. He could even take Bud along and perhaps put him in school. He had, at the present, funds enough to put it over.

But the dimensions of the Luball holdings, the fabled Silver Trail Mine, the forced knuckling down of his old friend Hype Frazer, the cool enmity of Mayor Weeper, and the hot tyranny of the Luballs had all made their mark upon the Duke. If Bud really was entitled to a piece of the Silver Trail, it would be a sin and a shame not to cash in. Especially since Duke would be the man who pulled the deal out of the fire of Luball's rapacity. . . .

He chafed, awaiting Juan Tejillo. It was the curse of Duke Bagley that he scarcely ever knew when his motives were altruistic or mercenary. The fact that he always made a profit rankled in him when he thought—as he rarely did—that he was only working for the interests of others.

Juan Tejillo led a half dozen braves down the hill to the conference, and Duke got out store paper and tobacco for the

smoke which must precede such dealings with the Apaches. . . .

★

IN THE town of Luball a meeting was taking place. Mayor Weeper had called it and in the secrecy of Weeper's house on the outskirts of town the men sat about and fingered their guns, listening. Rafe Luball and his hulking son were there, and Acey Deucey, looking lonely without Caliper. Three or four hard-bitten gun-toters hung around, watching the outside of the establishment.

Weeper said, "Sure, you've got the town—now. But Caliper was shot down. The man who did it got clean away. That hurts your prestige."

Rafe Luball rumbled, "They're gone, ain't they?"

"We won't have no more trouble with Bud Jasper, neither," said Bully with satisfaction. He was wondering if he could not duck out and slip over to Lissa Frazer's house.

Weeper said in a hard voice, "There's talk around town about the Jaspers. Twice today I heard people say the Apaches never killed them."

Rafe Luball said, "Who says that? Show me the man!"

"It was women," said Weeper. "The wives of men in business—and young Lissa Frazer is spreading the story."

Luball's eyes hid behind the hoods of his lids. He said, "There's way of stoppin' talk."

"Not woman talk," said Weeper sharply. "You can't bully women—not even you, Rafe."

"We can try it," said young Luball eagerly. "Just throw a scare into 'em. They'll stop!"

"There's men behind the talk," muttered Rafe Luball. "Hit at the men; the women'll quit."

"The man behind the talk," said Weeper deliberately, "is Bagley. He is using Hype Frazer—the one man you could never handle."

"What does Bagley know?" demanded Luball. "He's a stranger here!"

"Wallaby sent a message," said Weeper, playing his ace with care. "Bagley is trying to do business with Juan Tejillo."

Rafe Luball said, "Tejillo?" and paused abruptly.

"Yes, the chief who has been suspected of killing the Jaspers," said Weeper coldly. "He and Bagley are probably together right now."

Rafe Luball sat very still, and even Weeper could not read through the heavy lids which concealed his eyes. Bully shifted uncomfortably, unable to understand the nuances of the conversation. In a corner, Acey Deucey cleaned his six-shooter and waited. The gunman had confidence in Mayor Weeper.

Finally Rafe Luball moved. He said, "We'll have to take steps. If Bagley stays in this country. . . . The fat fool! Why did he have to barge in here?"

Weeper permitted himself a slight, cold smile. "Bagley can smell a profit a hundred miles away. I've heard tales of him. Whiskey and gold are his gods. You can't buy him off when he gets his big nose set on either. He prefers taking it his own way—all of it, not part."

Rafe Luball said, "I'm a big man! The governor consults me! No tinhorn trickster can run a blazer on me!"

Weeper continued to smile as he waited. Luball would have to make the first move. Then Weeper would lay his own plans. The Jaspers had been killed before Weeper's advent into Luball's existence.

The mayor had his own ideas about what had happened in the hills that day and for the present, he was keeping it to himself. But Weeper also could see a profit in a deal.

He had never been able to obtain a piece of the Silver Trail, even for cash. Luball had stubbornly kept it all to himself, his slatternly wife and his lubberly son.

The town was growing, it was rich. Weeper was ambitious beyond the position of Mayor and general factor to such blockheads as Rafe and Bully Luball. . . .

★

IN THE hills Duke Bagley smoked and sent Bud to climb a tree and watch the pass through which a posse might come. Juan Tejillo sat apart from his braves and his black eyes were suspicious. Duke took the fat belt from

around his waist and weighed it in his hands. Juan's eyes immediately went blank.

Duke said softly, "I trust my red brother. Yaas, indeed. This is the gold for the skins." He placed it on the ground at the Apache's feet. "I cannot take them right now."

Juan did not touch the belt. He said, "No ponies?"

Duke said, "No ponies. And—er—I need a little time. There's a matter of some killin's—years ago. The boys got murdered by someone not Apache."

Juan said, "No savvy, my brother."

Duke said, "I just wanted to see the spot. Like to look around."

"Too many moons have gone by," said Juan, shaking his head. His eye roved to the belt. "Chivava Oro good boy. You take him?"

"Yaas, indeed. But we ought also to take the Luballs and your acquisitive Indian agent, Wallaby, and last but not least the clever and brave Mayor Weeper. And take 'em good!"

There was a long silence. Duke knew that Juan Tejillo would not give an answer until he had gone completely over the situation, examining every detail, weighing the chances of gain for his people. Finally the chief said, "Wallaby is a big pig. Luball is a coyote who thinks himself wolf. But Weeper is a bad hombre."

"Yaas, indeed," murmured Duke. "My sentiments exactly. Who killed the Jaspers?"

Juan said evasively, "My brother, Cucuracha, gives gold for skins without fear. He trusts Juan. It is good."

From the treetop, Bud's young voice interrupted "There's a party climbin' Silver, headin' towards the old mine! I can see the Luballs an' Acey Deucey and a couple more. But not Mayor Weeper."

Juan Tejillo said. "That is in mountain where killing was. You go now?"

Duke hoisted himself to his feet. "No time like the present . . . Bud, let's travel."

The boy slid down. He said, "I betcha we got 'em stirred up. I betcha they're gonna make sure of somethin' about my pop and mom. . . ."

"Smart boy," said Duke. "Stay close behind and don't make a noise. Keep your gun in your holster—*understand?*"

At the roar of the last word the boy jumped and nodded. He caught up the horse and took a position at the tail of the procession. Two sturdy little Apaches went along with the chief. Duke's money belt was concealed beneath the white shirt which draped over Juan's high leggins. The motley caravan began climbing the western slope of Silver, above the mine which had produced so much ore for the coffers of Rafe Luball and his cohorts.

Finally they had to leave the horses. Duke made a wry face, hitched at his gun belt and climbed. Perspiration dampened him until he could have wrung out a quart from his shirt alone. The rarified air of six thousand feet elevation was breath-taking, but the Apaches went up and up as though they were walking a dirt road.

They struck a path around the cliff which was almost the apex of Silver. It was a mountain goat trail and Duke clung to the sheer wall, refraining from a single glance to the craggy red rocks below. He had always feared heights, and this was the worst traveling he had ever known. He was sick and trembling when suddenly the small plateau spread before them, and Juan Tejillo was motioning them all to keep their heads down.

Duke staggered to shelter behind a fir tree which clung perilously to life upon the eastern edge of Silver's peak. Bud was already worming his way to a position of vantage, peering down.

The boy said, "Luball's there alone. That's right where my folks got killed, Duke! The rest of 'em are below, guardin' the trail. Ol' Rafe's scrabblin' around in a sorta cave."

Duke said, "Don't make much sense . . . What do you know, Juan Tejillo? What are you keeping back?"

The Apache chieftain nodded, staring downward at the heavy shoulders of the owner of the Silver Trail. He said in a low voice, speaking rapid Spanish, "Juan always knew of the mother lode which Tom Jasper found. All Apaches knew. Tom Jasper was good man. He took samples, hid them. Luball must have hidden them in cave. Maybe Luball afraid Tom Jasper put sign on ore samples. Maybe we now drive Luball away."

Duke forced himself forward and made himself peer over the edge of the rocks. Luball was already scrambling down. He was carrying a small sack, such as was used in the mines to hold samples of ore. Duke watched, saw the big man store the sack carefully in the saddle bag of a big chestnut stallion. He eased back and lay upon the ground, staring up at Juan Tejillo. He said, "He's not throwing it away. Let him go for now. Better you shouldn't be in on this, Juan."

The Apache, still speaking Spanish, said, "You know that Luball killed Chivava Oro's parents. Always the Apache has known it. White men go their way—Apache stays on reservation."

"Unless he goes on warpath," chuckled Duke. "You and me understand each other, Juan. I'll pick up the skins on the way out of these parts."

"Wallaby no find skins," said Juan. He almost grinned. "Cucuracha find them easy." He made a sketch on the ground, showing a tall pine tree, and explaining with quick gestures. The pelts were buried in a great cache, covered with pine needles and branches. There would be Apaches nearby to help Duke dig them up when the time came.

Duke said, "Hide your money, Juan. Don't let Wallaby know you got it. In a day or so we'll be gone."

Bud was waiting, his face pale. He said, "I savvy enough Spanish to know what happened. I'm goin' to town."

Duke said, "No. We'll handle this careful. We can ruin Luball if we go about it right."

Bud said, "He killed my mom and pop!"

Duke said, "We ain't sure. Maybe he only knew how and when they were killed."

Bud said, "You know better'n that!"

Before Duke could reach out a hand the boy was gone over the edge of the plateau, down the way they had come. Duke started forward, chasing him. He got to the edge of the cliff and grabbed hold of a tree. He closed his eyes and groaned, "Blast his ornery hide! Can't follow him! Juan!"

But the Apache shook his head. It was too dangerous to attempt a headlong flight down the narrow trail. Bud was already in tiny figure, leaping like a goat from rock to rock, making furious speed. Even the Apaches would not risk life and limb to follow his path.

Duke said, "He'll get killed, the sawed-off, foolish little old button! I got to get down off this place!"

It was the hardest task he had ever faced. He swallowed his heart a thousand times, even making the descent with the aid of the Indians. He cursed himself for his weakness, stumbling panic-stricken from shelf to shelf down the precipitate way. He never had understood this fear which had been with him all his life. It made him ashamed, and somewhere down deep it fanned the flame of a great anger against men who would murder a miner and his wife for possession of a lode of silver bearing ore.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Rules the Town

ACEY DEUCEY was reporting privately to Mayor Weeper. He said, "Rafe Luball rode up an' stayed awhile. Then he came down with a sack of ore. I saw him put it in his saddlebags an' heard it clink together. I think he hid the stuff in his house. Leastways, he went right up there and didn't even take Bully along."

Weeper sat behind the desk in the city hall and stared out of the window at the main street of Luball. After a while he said, "Round up some of the boys and keep the town under watch all night. This may mean a lot to us, Acey."

The gunman hesitated, fumbling at his cartridge belt. He said, "Boss, I don't think that Bagley's gone fer good. If he comes back—well, Caliper was my pardner. I'd like to have Bagley fer my own meat."

Weeper said, "Stick close to me, Acey. You'll get your wish, maybe.

We watched with satisfaction as the reckless light flickered in Acey's eyes. His orders would be carried out. He had to walk carefully because he could not afford to buck Luball in the open. If he could get hold of something which would incriminate the big man, however, his future would be assured. It was neces-

sary now to watch for the return of Duke Bagley, to protect Luball with great care and to work for his own interests—all at the same time. It was a large order, but Mayor Weeper considered himself a big man.

He saw the two Luballs walk across the street from the bank, heading for the Palace Bar. He did not want any trouble with Hype Frazer just yet, so he donned his gun-belt and hastened from the city hall. It was growing dark and the lights flickered on in the saloons up and down the street.

A horseman rode in at a canter. Weeper's mind was on the Luballs and the Palace Bar but his years of training in dangerous schools made him step into a shadow and check the lone rider. He recognized the thin shoulders and new clothing of young Bud Jasper. He swore heartily, remaining out of sight, looking for Duke Bagley. He was not quite ready for the Duke and the kid. . . .

The stout man did not appear, Weeper took heart, stepping out where he could see the entire length of the street. The kid rode past, his face white in the light of the lamps. He dropped from the horse before the Palace Bar. He drew his Colt, examined it carefully, shoved a cartridge into the one empty chamber—all the motions of a man going into a gunfight against odds. Weeper tiptoed along the edge of the buildings, keeping out of sight, moving soundlessly.

Bud went to the window of the Palace and stared within, only his nose appearing between the half-blinds and the pulled-down brim of his hat. Weeper moved closer.

The kid turned and walked stiff-legged towards the swinging doors. His hand was on the butt of his gun now and his lips were drawn slightly back from his teeth, giving him a matured, wolfish expression which shocked even Weeper.

In that moment the mayor knew the truth. He was a clever man and a quick one. The Luballs had ridden up to the scene of the Jasper massacre and had brought back a secretive bag of ore.

Evidently Bud Jasper had also been up there on Silver. Now Bud was loaded for bear and seeking the Luballs. It was as clear as crystal to the watching man.

He could stand there and watch it—and he could call the turn either way if he chose. He could side the kid—or he could kill the kid and blackmail the Luballs forever. He had no fear of the owner of the Silver Trail. He had no compunctions about killing any of those involved.

But he remembered Duke Bagley. He recognized from the start that the Duke's mind was as devious as his own. If he threw in against the Luballs, he would still have to reckon with Duke. But if he stuck with the mine owner and his son, he would have the miners and part of the town with which to battle Bagley—and always there was another day for a smart man who knew inside facts.

He let the kid get inside the doors. He heard the young voice say, "All right, you murderin' Luballs! I know you killed my folks! Fill your damned hands!"

Mayor Weeper stepped noiselessly through the doors, behind the kid. For a split second he enjoyed the tableau, the astounded, pale faces of the Luballs, the glances of suspicion going about the room, the more timid citizens diving for cover, the worried face of Hype Frazer behind the bar. Then he moved forward, raised the muzzle of his gun and brought the heavy barrel down sharply upon the new hat which Duke Bagley had bought for Bud Jasper.

The kid slumped to the floor in a silent, huddled heap. Mayor Weeper's weapon covered Hype Frazer. He said easily, "Looks like I was just in time. You wouldn't want the boy killed, Hype. We'll just lock him up. He must have been eating loco weed, making charges like that!" Weeper's teeth smiled at the Luballs, but his eyes were dark with mockery. He said, "No, Bully. Bud's my prisoner. I'll lock him up in city hall."

The Luballs fell back before his piercing gaze. He bent and raised Bud to his feet. Acey Deucey and two other Weeper men came from nowhere and carried the slight form over across the street to the squat dark outlines of the city hall. Weeper went towards the Luballs and said, "Let's heist one. The kid might have downed one of you, at that!"

Bully said loudly, "I was jest gonna cut him down like a stalk o' corn when you busted in!"

But Rafe was silent, quaffing his drink in one gulp. The hooded eyes told Weeper nothing. The big man was thinking, and it suddenly occurred to the egotistical Mayor that Rafe Luball, after all, had run his town for many years, that the Silver Trail was the biggest mining property in the state; that the governor indeed consulted Luball about various matters. And that, although the bulbous-nosed man was the father of a fool—he need not necessarily be a fool himself!

He was glad then that he had not killed Bud Jasper. He had the boy—he could talk to him and learn some things he needed to know. There were plenty of ways to make the lad speak up. His eyes flickered, remembering certain Indian tricks from the past.

He would need to be alert to defeat Luball. The big man was tougher than most people could believe . . . He finished his drink, made an excuse and drifted from the Palace. He caught one glimpse of Luball's stony face turned after him and pretended to be making the round of the bars.

As soon as he thought it safe he ducked across the street and went by devious route to the rear of the city hall. . . .

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ON THE edge of Luball, Duke dismounted from the big horse and walked, leading the animal. He had failed to catch the fleeing boy and he was worried. He saw a man lurking in the shadow of a building and stopped, motionless in the dark. The man lit a cigarette, walked up and down, obviously watching the road in from Silver.

Duke put a hand on Petey's muzzle, cautioning silence. He came up behind the man and reached out one great arm. He got a grip on the man's throat and pulled him close, peering at the face, careful lest it be a sentinel set by Hype Frazer.

He recognized one of the hangers-on in Weeper's crowd. He laid his gun barrel along the ear of the man and tied the unconscious form with a great care to a tree behind the house, using his lariat. Then he led Petey by back alleys, stumbling over refuse and cursing silently until he had reached the rear of Hype's house.

He left Petey sniffing at a heap of garbage and crossed the yard, wary lest a guard had been set here also. No one appeared, so he stole to the back door and scratched lightly.

Lissa's voice said, "Who is it?"

Duke said, "Don't let out any light. I want to talk to you."

After a moment the lamp was blown out. Then the girl was beside him, trembling with excitement. She said, "They've got Bud. At the city hall. Rafe's been drinking a whole lot and I had to chase Bully away with a gun just now."

Duke said, "How many men have they got?"

"Dozens!" she said. Her eyes were wide with fear and her lips trembled. "Father says Luball wants Bud killed, but Weeper put him in the city hall. Bully's supposed to keep prisoners in the jail. . . ."

"Ah," said Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Weeper—now there is a smart one!"

The girl said, "Father will side you, Mr. Bagley. You've got to get Bud away from them! They *did* kill his parents, didn't they?"

Duke said, "Wal—guess they did, gal. You go back inside and get word to your paw that I'm in town. Got to look around a bit. Don't worry about Bud, consarn his hide! He walked right into them, the little fool!"

"He's not a fool!" she said sharply. "He's—he's brave and he's desperately unhappy. . . ."

"Sure!" said Duke hastily. "You're right, gal! Now be good and don't fly off the handle. Just tell Hype I'm around. He'll know when I turn loose my curly wolf. . . ."

He got quickly away from the girl. The hastiness of youth had already blasted his plans for skullduggery against the Luballs. Now he had to worry about rescuing Bud when he should be outsmarting the opposing forces. He faded down the street, knowing he was too big to hide very long, weighing the chances against a townful of hard characters who would undoubtedly kill him upon sight. It was, he swore, a hard world when a man began looking out for someone besides himself.

They had good reason for killing him,

too. He had proclaimed himself as the man who had downed Caliper. The mayor and the Luballs together could make a murder charge stand up against him, since Bud had not given Caliper a chance to fire a shot.

Weeper and the Luballs together. He stopped short in the deep shadows of the city hall. He was in an alley between that building and a harness shop, for the moment wholly concealed from casual view.

Lissa had said that Weeper was holding Bud apart from Luball's jail. There was something in that. He leaned against the clapboards of the city hall, pondering.

At that moment he heard the despairing cry, a sound which echoed in his ears and drove strategems from his mind. It was the voice of young Bud Jasper, and the lad was in terrible pain. Duke's hand leaped to his gun and in two jumps he had gained the city hall steps. . . .

★

ALL the forces of evil were at work that night in the town of Luball. Men prowled the streets, their trigger fingers itching. Old Rafe and his son sat in the empty jail and grimly counted minutes. Weeper, in the city hall, went about his gruesome business with hard eyes and a harder heart.

Hype Frazer had been talking. Merchants kept within the Palace Bar, drinking their whiskey, wondering if they dared listen to the barkeeper who spoke so boldly against their lord and master, the man who held the purse strings and could abolish their credit.

When Duke hit the city hall steps there were three men to bar his way, all large and rough. He stopped short before them, unwilling to shoot and bring the town about his ears. One growled, "Who sent you?" peering in the dimness.

Duke said, "Rafe wants Weeper," catching at straws.

The man snorted, "He cain't have him."

Duke said, "I'll tell that to Rafe." He turned away as though to retreat.

Another of the trio said, "Wait. The mayor's got no quarrel with Rafe. He said so."

"Pah!" spat the first speaker. "It's a split and you know it. T' hell with ol' Rafe!"

"No, wait," the other persisted. Duke hesitated, watching them. They turned attention from him, arguing. He took a step, another. He slipped past them and gained the door of the city hall.

The door was locked, as he had expected. But it was not a sturdy door, not one which was accustomed to being shut against the town. Duke's shoulder went against it, his back bulged with the effort. As the tallest of the three men turned, looking for him, he slipped inside and down the hall, long legs striding, spurs rattling.

There was no chance for secrecy, for intrigue, for the setting of one faction against the other. Given time, he knew he could have managed it. Weeper was playing a deep game—Luball was tough enough to fight back. Even now they were apart. Duke could have slyly injected more trouble between them. It would have been a lark and a pleasure to him.

But the outcry of the young lad in Weeper's hands had negated all that. He was also pretty sure that the tall gunman on the steps had seen him enter the city hall. It was a time for sudden action.

The boy cried out once more, and the sound came from a room in the rear to the left of the hall. Duke hurried, slapping his shoulder against the portal with more vehemence than he had used on the front entrance. He barged into the chamber with eyes blazing and his gun drawn.

They had Bud tied by his wrists, his heels clear of the floor. The strain upon his young arm sockets was terrific. There was a whip on the table and Weeper's face was tight-drawn with savagery. Acey Deucey and two other men whirled, reaching for guns as Duke slammed Weeper away from the boy.

Then all were reaching for the ceiling under the menace of the circling muzzle of Duke's sixgun. Duke's muffled voice chilled them. "Make a play, somebody! Make one leetle move! The Duke's beggin' you to as much as twitch!"

Duke's left hand produced a knife from his boot. He sliced viciously and Bud fell to the ground, gasping with relief,

rubbing at his wrists to restore circulation. Duke said, "You know what you have to pay for this, Weeper!"

The mayor was white-faced. He had gone too far to retreat and in him was a bulldog strain. He said, "I can tell you things you'd like to know, Bagley."

"Sellin' out?" Duke sneered. "I know all I need to. Thought you were a man, Weeper. Yaas, indeed. Had me a bit scared for awhile. Thought you were bad."

Acey said, "Luball will get you, Bagley. You can't get away with murder!"

Duke said, "Four of you in one small room! I only tote one gun. It's got five shots in it."

Bud said in a small voice. "He asked me about you, Duke. About the skins. He wanted to get Juan in bad. He wanted to dry-gulch you when you got the pelts. . . ."

"Yaas, indeed," drawled the Duke. "A careful fella. He knows the Luballs killed your folks. He wants in on the Silver Trail. A smart skunk!"

There were footsteps in the hall, the sound of curses and a blow. The voice of the tall sentry who had stopped Duke rose to a bellow, "Weeper! They're comin'!" A shot echoed in the hall. Bully Luball swore violently.

"Here's your chance, Weeper," said Duke. "Here comes Luball for your prisoner. Explain this one away!"

He kicked out the window sash. He motioned Bud through. The footsteps came nearer. Weeper stood motionless, watching the Duke. In one motion the big man leaped through the hole he had made. Shots sounded, crashing through the sills, following him in the night. He landed heavily, dipped his knees and ran zigzag across a courtyard. A bullet drove his hat from his head. He reached out and rescued it before it could touch the ground, whirled and threw three swift shots at the lighted window.

Then he had turned a corner and Bud was leaning against the wall, breathing hard. Duke said, "Get over to Hype's house. Be careful not to get caught again. Lissa will hide you."

Bud said, "They think you killed Caliper. They'll shoot you or hang you. Why did you tell 'em that?"

"Never mind!" roared Duke. "Do as you're told! Git!"

He gave the boy a shove, but his heart was heavy as the kid limped, staggering, going to Hype's house. He was suddenly very cold in the pit of his stomach. It was a bad portent, a sign that the Duke was about to do something foolish. He turned and went back toward the city hall.

He had almost reached the front when he heard loud voices within, engaged in hot argument. He heard Rafe Luball say, "You let him git away and you can hand in your resignation! Bagley never shot Caliper. That boy done it! Bagley's gun was not smokin' when he come out on that black hoss. I *know* the boy killed Caliper, I say!"

Acey Deucey said harshly. "Say—is that true?"

Bully Luball shrilled. "I seen it myself. I was hidin' outside the barn. . . ."

"And you didn't chip in to help Caliper!" accused Weeper, quick to take his advantage.

"That Bagley is too quick!" complained Bully. "He come around with that gun . . . You didn't do nothin' when he held that gun on you, that nervous way he's got."

Rafe's heavy voice said, "We're losin' time arguin'. All right, Weeper, bring your men. We'll find Bagley and the brat and hang them both. I warned that button. I'm his guardeen, but he's a killin' little rat!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Duke Rides On

DUKE backed to the shelter of the harness shop. He could make a stand in the alley and let them have it as they came out. He could get the Luballs and Weeper and maybe Acey Deucey—that would be enough. Leaderless, the others would be on no account. Hype Frazer would have things under control if the big ones were eliminated.

They would get the Duke, of course. With two guns he might have stood them off, but he had given the small bulldog weapon to Bud Jasper. He would have to stand up and take it if he hoped to knock

off the quartette he had privately marked for slaughter.

He showed his teeth and braced himself in the alley. A mayor who would torture a boy, an overlord who would kill men and women, gunmen to do their hire—it was more than Duke could stomach. He held the gun high, ready to cut them down without conscience.

A voice behind him whispered, "You want to die, Cucuracha?"

Duke did not turn his head. "Got a few skunks to kill, first. That you, Juan?"

"Juan been around town. Nobody look at old Injun," said the Apache. "Cucuracha trust Juan. Wallaby-Agent send messenger, arrest Cucuracha for give Injun firewater."

"One of your braves get drunk?" asked Duke. He lowered his gun, flexing his hand, working the trigger finger. He did not dare to miss. . . .

"Si," said Juan sorrowfully, "Juan is ashamed. He comes to warn Cucuracha. He stop by tepee of Luball."

Duke said, "You—what?"

"Find something good," grinned Juan Tejillo. "Long time Luball say Apache kill Jaspers. Not so. Look!"

He had the bag of ore from Silver. The Indian had slipped in and stolen it from whatever secret hiding place Luball had chosen for its temporary deposit. Trust an Apache for that!

"Hole in wall," chuckled Juan. "Cover by stove. Juan find—very good!"

He shifted to Spanish, which went along better. He was alone, he said, because he did not trust his braves after the sad happening of the afternoon when One Feather had boasted in his cups of the deal with the Duke. He wanted to help Duke—and incidently to retain the gold which he knew very well Duke would reclaim if there was a slip-up which could be blamed upon the Apaches. Meantime, he had thought about Luball's actions and had stolen the ore sack.

Duke said, "Come along with me!"

They hot-footed it out of the alley just as the men poured from the city hall. Duke led the way across back lots to the rear of the Palace Bar. In the light from a window he examined the contents of the sack.

There were ore samples, tagged with tin discs, attached by rusted wire. They had been scratched with a sharp tool. "Ore from claim beyond Silver Trail mine, by Tom Jasper."

Duke said, "Look—they named it later!"

"The Bud mine," a second tag was marked. "Registered ore, 2-3-81."

Duke said, "Luball knew it was recorded. He killed them, then destroyed the records. Who was the assayer then?"

Juan had to reckon on his fingers. After a while he said, "Wallaby-Agent was recorder those moons ago."

Duke whooshed through pursed lips. He said, "Okay, Juan! That does it. Looks like you saved me a ruckus. This will convict them before any jury. Reckon I won't have to kill nobody, after all!"

Juan said, "Mebbeso. Mebbenot. El Cucuracha killed plenty other time." His face wrinkled and he leaned against the building, waiting Duke's next word.

Duke said, "Get Petey and my pack animals." He explained where he had left Petey, exactly what he wanted. He ended, "Then our deal is good—finished."

Juan grunted once, hesitated, then was gone in the night. Duke opened the back door to the Palace Bar and walked in. The assembled neutral citizenry of the town turned to stare at him. Hype had done well to hold them together that long and only upon a hunch, Duke thought gratefully.

He tossed the sack upon the bar and said, "Rafe Luball dug this out of the side of Silver this afternoon. Bud and I saw him. Just look it over. Then tell me what you want to do."

He reached for a bottle of whiskey and tilted it. There was a gurgling, peaceful sound while Hype and the others examined the glittering samples of high grade silver ore.

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HYPE said, "Rafe thought he was safe leavin' the stuff up there. Then he got scared of you and moved it."

Duke said impatiently, "Who's goin' to get him? Gotta leave town myself. Got a deal on. . . ."

There was noise in the street. A mer-

chant said hastily, "They're comin'! The Luballs and Weeper and Acey Deucey and the whole crew!"

Hype grabbed a sawed-off shotgun. He said, "I'll take them myself, if no one else will!"

They were milling in the street. Someone shouted, "There's the button! With the gal!"

Duke said, "That young 'un! He'll get killed yet!"

He was running out into the street, forgetful of his departure, of Juan and the horses. He was aware of Hype at his heels and many men ahead. He saw Lissa, then, making for the Palace, bearing a rifle and a revolver. Bud was behind her, carrying an armful of weapons. They were coming to the defense of the girl's father and his friends, Duke knew. They had heard the mob advancing and surmised there was trouble.

Weeper's voice said, "Get that boy!"

Duke was in the middle of the street, without protection. His gun whipped up, leveled. He saw Acey Deucey aiming a shot down the side street at the running boy. He fired.

Acey dropped his gun, spun around as if looking for his assailant. Then he pitched forward on his face.

Luball bawled, "It's Bagley!"

They turned, the mob of them. It was worse than if he had tackled them from the alley, Duke thought. He saw the expressions of surprise, hate and determination on the various faces. He threw a shot at Weeper and missed.

The Luballs were protected by other men. Duke swung his bulk, making it harder for them to sight on him and saw Weeper leveling a carbine. He dropped to one knee and shot off-hand.

Weeper staggered, dropping the gun, his hand going to his shoulder. Duke leaped for the partial shelter of a porch. A bullet creased along his left arm. He dropped flat on his stomach and pumped three shots into the crowd, emptying his gun.

They charged forward, having counted his shots. There was a dull roar as he fumbled for cartridges, his left arm too numb to be of much use. He saw the front rank of the band melt away, saw men writhing in the dirt.

Hype was crouching near him saying, "I got two guns. Pour it into them."

Then something plunked beside the Duke and he saw the thin face of Bud Jasper. The lad said, "Juan is—"

The rest was lost as he nestled a rifle to his shoulder and fired without aiming. Bully Luball, seeking cover on the opposite side of the street, threw his hands high and screamed. He fell, kicking at the ground. "Always knew I'd have to kill him," Bud said coolly. "He was after Lissa. . . ."

Duke nailed a man trying to inch closer and said, "You didn't shoot that good when you were pottin' at me."

"Wasn't tryin' to do nothin' but scare you," grinned the boy. He knocked a man off the steps of the store.

The enemy was deploying and getting under cover, now, though. The terrified citizens in the Palace were not gun-fighters and would be of no use. Hype was swearing and binding up his left leg. It could not go on like this, Duke knew.

He saw Rafe Luball make a prodigious leap and clear the still twitching body of his son. The man's face was mad with rage. Duke fired at him but missed. Luball gained the stairs of the bank and was gone.

Duke said, "Stick it out, boys. This will be good."

He went back into the alley next to the Palace Bar. He found a porch post and shinnied up a foot or two, his arm aching like a sore tooth. He grabbed the roof of the porch with his right hand and hauled himself up. He lay flat in the darkness, waiting.

The window of the office above the bank opened slowly. A rifle barrel peered forth, circled. Down in the street the gunfire was incessant and Hype's sawed-off weapon boomed loudly above the others.

Duke waited for a lull. Then he called, "Here I am, Rafe! Over here!"

The rifle barrel leaped. But Duke's sixgun shattered the momentary silence, once, twice. The rifle slipped out, fell clattering to the ground. Rafe Luball fell over the sill. His arms dangled, he hung there where all could see.

At that moment there was a clatter of hoofs and the weirdest of wild yells echoed

in the streets of Luball. The sound froze the blood of every listener. They had heard it before—many had shivered with the horror which followed.

Down the main street came a cavalcade. On a mustang, Juan Tejillo, brandished a gun, uttering defiance. Following him, riderless, was Petey, and in the rear the pack animals thundered along.

Like magic the street was deserted. Duke scrambled to earth as Juan rode up. In an instant he was astride of Petey. He said, "You got everything runnin' now! Keep 'em runnin'!"

Bud wailed, "Where you goin' Duke?"

A figure rose from the bodies and wobbled forward. Duke swerved Petey, drawing out of range. It was Weeper, his gun steady, advancing, his left arm dangling but otherwise unhurt.

Weeper fired first. His shot cut through Duke's flannel shirt. Then Duke's sixgun cracked. There was a belch of fire, the smack of bullet in flesh. Weeper sagged and tumbled to earth. Duke said, "Can't kill half the town and stick around. Reputation won't stand it. Clean it up, Hype. Get the boy his share."

Hype said, "Wait, Duke!"

"Got friends," laughed Duke. "Goin' to meet them. Just change the name of this town and run it right. So long, Bud. You're an infernal nuisance—bless you!"

He brought Petey around and rode out of town. He knew better than to stay when the governor got nosey about things. He also wanted Juan Tejillo out of there.

They rode hard and there were expert hands to dress his wounds while the men dug the precious skins from under the pine tree. Juan Tejillo said, "We go back be good Injun, now."

Duke said, "I got to mosey down to El Paso and cash in on these skins. But I'll be back."

"Wallaby-Agent?" asked Juan hopefully.

"The same," said Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Must've made a pack of money off you fellers. Yaas!"

Juan said, "We wait, Cucuracha!"

"Load up them ponies," said Duke. "I got to get away before that button finds me. That Bud like to got me killed four-five times! Can't keep up with him."

He drove his pack horses into the night. In El Paso was whiskey and women and song. If he thought about Bud Jasper all through the hard ride, it was a thing he did not often allow himself. But he was quite happy.

The kid would be all right now that he had back his inheritance—and Lissa was there to manage him. It made the Duke all warm inside to think of it—almost as though he had remembered to bring a bottle of his favorite Blue Grass Bourbon!

THE END

Through Hell to Dodge City!

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CHAPTER ONE

Death at Sundown

RIDING out of the setting sun, Lang Targee held back his horse and pack animal, letting John Doe take the lead as they topped the last prairie swell, beyond the crest of which lay civilization.

Lang Targee had seven hundred miles of steady riding under his belt. He had his fill, for the moment at least, of sagebrush and buffalo grass and unbroken horizons, of dust and canteen water, and of sleeping in fireless camps with one ear to the ground in the Cheyenne country, and counting distance by time instead of miles.

His elkskin jerkin hung loose on his big

ROLLING TO HELL! ★

The Shepherd Company was rolling . . . rolling toward the distant Rockies. . . .

frame, for the past weeks had honed weight off a limber-jointed body that showed the loss of every ounce. The loneliness of that journey was stamped in the reflective depths of his sun-puckered blue eyes.

He hungered now for the sight of other humans. First he wanted to fulfill the mission that had brought him speeding over those weary miles from the mountains. Then he aimed to sit in style at a table, eat cooking other than his own, lean an elbow on a bar and savor a convivial drink and maybe swing a girl in spangled skirts over a sawdust floor. He had gold in his money belt, raw and virgin dust washed out of placer sand by his own hands. More of it was waiting for him on his claim in the Rockies, but now he wanted his fling.

Still, his own anticipation was dwarfed by the interest with which he watched the wistful face of the man he called John Doe as their ponies slogged on.

John Doe's head lifted, and his faded eyes held the pathetic, blank bewilderment of a lost child. A commonplace, gnarled man of middle age, his coarse, stringy hair was prematurely gray, and his rugged face was ravaged by the marks of suffering. The clothes he now wore belonged to Lang, and were many sizes too big for him.

"Leavenworth!" Lang said sharply. "Leavenworth City. Fort Leavenworth. You must remember this place?"

A mile ahead, sprawling along the Missouri River, lay the teeming artery of the gold rush, pulsing with the tide of venturesome thousands who were poising there for the jump-off into that stretch of wild, Indian-infested prairie and plains that Lang had just traversed. The hiving drone of the boom town drifted to Lang's ears, and he could hear the hurdy gurdies playing in the dance halls and honky-tonks in its center.

Beyond the flat roofs of Leavenworth towered a forest of steamboat masts along the river front, while the flats nearer at hand were the nesting place of hundreds of white-winged prairie wagons. Leavenworth had tripled in size in the year since Lang had last seen it.

For an instant a hopeful glint cut through the blank pathos in John Doe's eyes. But almost at once the vacancy and despair came back. He absently rubbed a healing, purple scar which ran from his forehead up into his hair.

"Fer a second I had a feelin' I'd seen this place some'airs, big feller," he said apologetically, "but now it's gone. I can't recollect—can't remember nothin'."

"It'll come back to you sooner or later, oldtimer," Lang said gently. "You must have passed through Leavenworth when you headed West. Maybe you'll see something that'll cut through the fog after we hit town."

Lang had found John Doe lying out on the plains three weeks earlier as he headed down the Smoky Hill trail from Denver City. Buzzards were patiently circling overhead, and John Doe was stretched out face up, nearly naked there in the glaring sun of late June, with an ugly welt on his head where he had been hit by something—a glancing bullet, Lang guessed.

Lang had fanned the spark of life alive in that wasted body, and after four days John Doe was able to travel, riding Lang's relay horse. But that was all Lang knew about his companion, and that was all John Doe knew about himself. He could not recall his name or how he had received that injury. His past was a total blank.

Lang's guess was that John Doe was the survivor of an Indian attack on some wagon train, and that he had wandered for many miles on the plains before collapsing. Lang had scoured the country around the spot where he had found John Doe, seeking some thread that would help unsnarl the mystery, but the page was still a blank. John Doe might have come from the moon for all the help he could give Lang in solving his own identity.

Lang now led the way down into the flats past the camps of the wagon companies. Cookfires were blazing. Banjos tinkled here and there in this wheeled community, and somewhere a woman was singing as she worked over a supper fire. The deep lowing of oxen formed a tranquil overtone to these sounds.

A strapping big parson, wearing the traditional white collar and black sack suit, was standing on a rostrum of wagon boxes in one of these wagon circles, his arms uplifted, his face turned to the sky, while around him two score of men and women knelt with heads bowed.

The words of the parson came in measured cadence to Lang as he skirted that wagon circle with John Doe:

"Oh, Lord, protect us in this journey we are undertaking. Lead us safely over the pitfalls and perils of the desert, and guide us, your humble children, into the paths of righteousness. Guard us and preserve us from the wrath of the pagans of the plains, and stay the savage hand that wields the tomahawk and scalping knife. Help us—"

That prayer was never finished, for a wild outcry halted the big, square-jawed preacher.

★

JOHN DOE was standing up in the stirrups. The vacant bewilderment was gone. His lined face flamed with a fury so devastating it struck a chill through Lang.

John Doe left the saddle, and his body did not seem gnarled now. He moved like an animal. Darting between wagons he raced through the startled ranks of the kneeling wagon people.

"Spain!" he shouted, and his voice was as wild as his first outcry. "Dex Spain, you hell-hound!"

He was heading straight for a spider-thin man, with sallow, saturnine features and a long, waxed black mustache, who wore a buckskin hunting shirt, leathern breeches and Crow moccasins. The man had been standing in the background, leaning on a new Henry repeating rifle, watching the worshippers with sardonic amusement.

Seeing that wild figure rush at him, the thin plainsman did not have time to lift the rifle. He frantically leaped back, snatching a knife from the scabbard hanging from a concho belt. But in his startled haste the knife dribbled from his long fingers.

Then John Doe had him by the throat, and fury gave him a demoniacal strength.

Lang left the saddle, and went ploughing through the scattering throng of worshippers. Women were screaming, and he collided with a fair-haired girl, who was recoiling from that scene of violence.

A pistol crashed with a dull, muffled report from somewhere near at hand when Lang was still two strides from the man of mystery.

Lang saw a spurt of dust leap from between John Doe's shoulder blades, as a round hole appeared in the flannel shirt he wore. Then came a spurt of life-blood.

John Doe's fingers slumped away from the throat of the man he was throttling. His body drew up in agony, and he pitched back into Lang's arms.

The mustached man, gagging, snatched up the knife he had dropped, and leaped with the blade poised, his face aflame. He would have plunged the knife into the heart of a man who had already received his death wound.

Lang, holding John Doe in his arms, whirled and drove a high-heeled boot into the knife wielder's stomach. That kick lifted its victim, sent him crashing against a wagon wheel, from where he fell on his face, rolling in agony.

Lang carried John Doe to the wagon-box rostrum the preacher had been using. John Doe's faded eyes were lucid now. Memory had returned. Hatred had torn aside the haze that had clouded his mind.

The big preacher bent over him, and shook his head regretfully. "I will pray for you, brother," he said, "and for the forgiveness of your sins. It is hard to die in violence, with passion in your heart. Forget those things and make your peace with God."

"He needs water now more than he needs prayer," Lang said. "He wants a chance to talk. Save your preaching for the yellow-belly who shot him in the back."

"May you be forgiven for such blasphemy," the preacher reproved, but he went striding away toward a water barrel.

John Doe had only seconds to live. His eyes carried an urgent message, and Lang bent close, placing his ear nearing the man's lips, trying to make out the halting, faint, words John Doe was uttering.

"Don't let— Don't. . . . Dex Spain's one of—one of—blood—blood—blood's—"

Then John Doe gasped, and his agonized words faded. The eyes looking up at Lang slowly drooped shut.

After a moment Lang got to his feet. He took the gourd from the hands of the big preacher who came hurrying up, and slowly poured the water on the ground.

"He's gone," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Marked for Doom

LANG turned, his eyes traveling bleakly over the staring circle of faces. "Who fired that shot?" he demanded harshly.

There was no answer.

Lang walked among them. "That was murder," he said. "Cold-blooded murder. John Doe was unarmed. The man who shot him has got some explaining to do."

They remained silent, glancing uneasily at each other. Lang questioned individuals, but every man and woman denied knowing the source of the bullet that had killed John Doe. They appeared puzzled by the mystery, and sincere enough. And

Lang was at a loss also, for he had not seen any powder flash when that shot was fired. The report had been queerly muffled and distorted as though the gun had been fired through a blanket.

Lang studied them. They seemed no different from the average run of stampeders. Painted on their wagons was the same watchword that the majority of the vehicles camped around Leavenworth carried emblazoned on their hoods: "Pike's Peak Or Bust!"

There were greenhorns among them, fresh from Eastern farms, a few drawling Blue Ridge mountain men and bearded Missourians, and two or three tough Border specimens. A few frightened women in calico and sunbonnets, and five or six solid-looking, prosperously garbed men who said they were merchants or traders. Lang had seen the counterparts of this assembly on the trails scores of times.

The plainsman, Dex Spain, had got to his feet, and was standing in the background, a baleful promise in his smouldering, little dark eyes as he watched Lang.

"What about it, mister?" Lang challenged him grimly. "Let's hear you do some talking."

"I don't know who shot yore pal," Dex Spain shrugged sullenly. "But he shore done me a favor. That bullet saved my bacon. Why'd yore pal jump me? Who is he? Acted like he had gone loco."

"You ought to know," Lang snapped. "He spoke your name: Dex Spain. I suppose that is your name."

"Thet's my name. But I never seen that old fool before in my life. I heard you call him John Doe. Kind o' a queer handle for a partner, ain't it? Was he ashamed of his right name? And what brand do you go by, mister?"

"Lang Targee is my name," Lang said. "I don't happen to know the real name of that poor devil. I found him out on the plains, wandering around with a welt on his head. He couldn't remember who he was, or how he came there."

"There's yore answer," Dex Spain shrugged. "The feller went berserk. I happened to be the nearest man in sight."

Spain turned away heading toward town, and Lang was left faced by a blank wall. Some member of this outfit had fired the shot that killed John Doe, and was either afraid to admit an impulsive mistake, or had other reasons for secrecy.

"It was a piece of wanton cruelty that will have its punishment in the hereafter," the preacher thundered.

"I'd prefer quicker action," Lang said.

" 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord. I can see that you are a man of violence. I will pray for you, my friend. I am the Reverend Perry Shepherd, from Pennsylvania. These good people have organized what I am pleased to call the Shepherd company. They have honored me by electing me captain. We set out for the gold camps at dawn tomorrow."

Shepherd was a six-footer who looked to be in his early forties, and powerful enough to grapple personally with the devil. The fire of a zealot burned in his hazel eyes, and his mane of thick hair, sprinkled with gray gave him a leonine aspect.

"Who is Dex Spain?" Lang asked, watching the buckskin-clad man vanish among the outer buildings of town.

"We have employed him as our guide, sir. An experienced plainsman we are assured, who knows the Smoky Hill trail thoroughly."

Lang turned to where John Doe's body lay on the platform. A throng had now gathered, attracted from other camps by the shooting.

"File past, all of you, and see if you can identify him," Lang requested.

They formed a line, and began passing by the temporary bier. Finally an old-timer, bow-legged from miles of whacking bulls, and with a hide whip coiled around his neck, paused, peering closer as he reached the platform.

"Sure," the old-timer exclaimed, "I place him now. His name is Jem Essick. I talked to him in Denver City last fall, played stud poker with him. He had made a strike some'aires in the diggin's. Said he aimed to make a clean-up by spring, an' head back to Illinois where he come from."

★

THAT was all Lang could learn. It was the consensus among the bystanders that Jem Essick was the victim of an Indian attack on some wagon-

train bound eastward from the mountains. Lang had been of that opinion, too, at first. But now he wondered. Jem Essick had been sane as he died, trying to voice some desperate warning. He had tried to tell Lang something about Dex Spain, and then he had died raving about blood.

"Will you see that he gets Christian burial at dawn?" Lang asked the preacher. "I'll pay expenses and be here for the services. Meanwhile I'll try to learn more about him."

"Willingly," Shepherd nodded.

A girl moved up to the preacher's side, and he patted her hand comfortingly. She was the same girl Lang had collided with as he attempted to halt Jim Essick before the killing. He took a second look at her now, suddenly suspicious of everyone and everything in this wagon company, wondering if her interference had been deliberate.

"This is Miss Grace Pope, of Philadelphia," Shepherd said, noting the way Lang eyed her. "She is heading for the mountains to join her father. I have the honor of looking out for her as temporary guardian during the journey."

Her hair was a warm, golden brown, and her eyes so dark a blue they looked black in that fading light.

Lang removed his flat-crowned, sun-faded hat and she made a small curtsey, eyeing his jerkin and bulky gun holster, and tanned face with the frank wonder of one unaccustomed to the frontier.

There was grace and poise in her straight carriage. Wearing a long skirt, a little jacket with puffed sleeves, and a high choker collar she was shapely, and there was in her a young and steady vitality and a warmth that Lang kept remembering as he mounted and led his two horses on into town.

Darkness came as Lang entered Leavenworth. The feverish activity of the day was dwindling out in the more substantial section of town given over to commerce, but the lights were flaring brighter in Cheyenne Street, and its cross lanes where gambling houses and dance halls catered to a restless welter of humanity.

Lang passed up Cheyenne Street, scanning the gilded names on the various gambling houses with close attention.

He did not find what he was seeking, and he went on into the more sedate business section, where the sidewalks echoed to the footsteps of the few pedestrians. He stabled his weary animals at a nighthawk livery. Shouldering his saddle roll, and with his rifle slung under an arm, he made his way to the Prairie House, a pretentious three-story, white-painted hotel, and engaged a room.

He tossed a coin to the young Negro bellhop who showed him to his quarters. "Where do I find Lady Midnight's faro bank?" he asked.

The boy cocked a dubious eye at Lang's plains garb, which bore their story of the long, hard miles, and of the many coulee camps.

"You'll find Lady Midnight's parlor, mistah, by followin' yo' nose east down Cheyenne Street to the fo'th corner. Turn right, an' yo'll see a place with blue velvet curtains at the windows. Theah's no name on Lady Midnight's parlor, suh. She caters to nothin' but high class gentlemen. Yo' can suah go broke immediate theah, mistah, or win yo'self a stake. But it ain't everybody's allowed past Lady Midnight's do', suh, meanin' no offense. She's quality, Lady Midnight is, even if she is a gamblin' person."

"I do look a little bit curly below the knees, I reckon," Lang grinned. "Fetch me plenty o' soap an' water."

Lang closed the door, sat the rifle in a corner and started to toss his hat on the bed. Then, remembering the old gambling superstition, he shied it to a chair. He thankfully relieved himself of the weight of his holstered cap-and-ball Navy six-shooter.

The bellhop had lighted an oil lamp. Lang crossed the room to the window, reaching to draw the heavy curtains.

His room was on the second floor, and this window overlooked an unlighted side lane and a freight yard, which was dark and deserted at this hour.

The vicious red lightning of a pistol shot gushed from those pooled shadows among the stored wagons in that freight yard.

The window glass shattered in Lang's face, stinging him with flying particles, and he felt the bullet whip at his thick, dark hair, heard it slap into the ceiling above him.

LANG leaped aside, blew out the lamp, and snatched his six-shooter from the holster. He crouched beneath the window, and cautiously peered out. This was not the first time he had been shot at. He carried a couple of scars on his body, relics of nearly ten years of following the will o' the wisp lure of gold to California, and down the trail to Santa Fe, and knocking around Texas as a freighter and hunter.

But those wounds had been received in the heat of pitched battle with Indians and desperadoes. This cold, ruthless attempt at murder aroused within him an icy fury.

He cocked the pistol, searched the shadows, but they remained black, motionless and silent. Nothing was there now.

The shot and the crash of falling glass had aroused the hotel. Lang pulled the curtain tight, lighted the lamp and opened the door. He began answering questions that had no answer.

A hard-bitten, small man, wearing a nickeled star, and two tied-down guns, came in and introduced himself as Milt Duvall, town marshal.

Duvall looked Lang over impersonally. "You're the Lang Targee that was mixed up in the killin' at the Shepherd wagon camp at sundown, aren't you?" he asked.

"I saw Jem Essick murdered," Lang shrugged.

"Maybe you better take it a little slow while yo're in Leavenworth, Targee. The local talent keeps me busy without havin' to worry about gun-grudges brought in from the plains."

Before he left, Duvall added another word. "If you're thinkin' that a trail guide name Dex Spain took that shot at you, you're on the wrong track. I heard how you mussed Spain up durin' that ruckus at the wagon camp. It happened I saw this Dex Spain down in Cheyenne Street not ten seconds before I heard the report of the gun that was fired at you. Spain couldn't have been here an' down there at the same time."

He went away, leaving Lang to think that over. Lang had been betting himself a hundred to one that it had been Spain who had tried to pay him off for that kick in the belly. But now he was left at sea, left with the realization that in a town of ten thousand strangers, there was one who had tried to put a bullet in his brain.

Lang bathed, changed to a clean, white shirt, necktie and dark trousers which he had carried carefully packed in his saddle roll. He carried two extra chambers for his Navy six-shooter in his saddle bags, loaded, and capped, and dipped in beeswax to keep the powder dry. Dropping them in his pocket, he strapped on the gun.

He found a late clothing store open, and bought a dark coat, for his white shirt made too good a target. He visited a barbershop, and afterwards ate a mighty meal at the best restaurant the town afforded. But as he moved in and out of these places he kept to the shadows, and scanned his vicinity with strict vigilance.

It was nine o'clock when he left the restaurant and turned into the blare and glare of Cheyenne Street. At first he found assurance in losing himself in the motley human tide that moved around him in a restless turbulence, in and out of the swing doors from which came the ceaseless blast of music and dancing and gambling.

Then slowly the belief that he was being persistently followed worked through him. He paused in shadow, searched the light-splashed street. There were two hundred men within gun-range of him, and only one figure brought any twinge of recollection. A paunchy, heavy-faced man, wearing a cloth top hat, a knee-length coat, and with a gray cape slung over his arm in the fashion of the day, was idly strolling the opposite sidewalk, taking in the sights.

Lang recalled him vaguely as one of the traders in Perry Shepherd's wagon company who had been among the onlookers when Jem Essick was shot. The man showed interest only in the garish scenes around him, and Lang's attention moved elsewhere.

He found nothing to justify the uneasiness that pulled hard at him, and he turned to move on.

He stared at a figure which turned a corner a few paces ahead of him. It was the slim-ankled, attractive Grace Pope.

She had a filled shopping bag on her arm. She hesitated, shrinking a little as she faced that bawdy thoroughfare. She

was plainly out of place here, a little frightened, and greatly embarrassed.

She made her decision. Putting her head down, she headed down the street, which was the shortest route toward her wagon company on the flats beyond.

Men began to ogle her, and turn to watch after she passed. A tinhorn gambler, wearing paste diamonds placed himself deliberately in her path, then blocked her progress again as she tried to sidestep him.

Lang overtook her then with long strides. He placed a hand on her arm. The tinhorn took one look at Lang's height and bulk, and faded swiftly into the crowd.

"I'm going your way," Lang said. "If you'll permit me?"

She started to pull away angrily, then he saw her recognize him and her brief shock of surprise. She smiled shakily.

"Thank you. If you would be so kind."

"You should not have come by way of this street," Lang said, taking the shopping bag.

"I know that now. I had been uptown, finishing some shopping. We're pulling out for the mountains in the morning. The backstreets were so dark I thought I'd be safer here where it was lighted."

Lange walked with her up the street until they were past the last dingy bar room, and the dying cookfires of the wagon camp were safely in sight ahead.

"You're all right now," he said, and lifted his hat.

She thanked him, and he started to turn away to return. Against the distant glare of the street behind him he fancied that a shadowy figure glided from sight among one of the shacks that were scattered along this fading nub of the gay district.

"One moment," he said. "May I ask a slight favor in return."

"Of course," she said unhesitatingly.

Lang wondered how to put it. "I have traveled a long ways to deliver a message to a certain party to whom I am deeply obligated," he said. "A man can meet accidents in Leavenworth. If you should hear in the morning that I have met with any mishap would you do this much for me? Send word to this person that Lang Targee has found the man with the scarred hand. Tell her this man is in the habit of patronizing the Golden Dragon gambling house in Denver City."

Her brows arched. "A strange message," she mused. "To whom shall I deliver it?"

"To a person called Lady Midnight."

★

GRACE POPE was somewhat taken aback. "Lady Midnight?" she echoed doubtfully. "I have heard of her, of course. She operates a gambling house here in Leavenworth."

"She is a gambler," Lang nodded. "Also a woman I am proud to call my friend. I wouldn't ask anything that might be embarrassing to you, except that—"

"—that you fear you might be murdered before you can retrace your steps to Lady Midnight's faro parlor," she finished for him, as he hesitated. "I heard the story while shopping of how someone tried to ambush a man named Targee at the Prairie House an hour or so ago. You expect another attempt on your life, don't you?"

"A man never knows," Lang deprecated.

"Yet you added to your risk by walking this additional distance with me, Mr. Targee, just to protect me from a few insults I could have easily ignored. I doubt if I would find it embarrassing to deliver your message to Lady Midnight, even though she does gamble for a living. We all gamble a little, I believe. Let me get the message straight. I am to tell her that the man with the scarred hand is a regular patron of the Golden Dragon in Denver City? Is that all?"

Lang nodded, and she extended a hand. She looked up at him quizzically. "You are a tall one, aren't you," she marveled. "Big enough to make an excellent target. I hope I do not have to deliver that message. Be careful, Mr. Targee. Dex Spain is in Leavenworth tonight. He hasn't forgotten what you did to him today. And—and perhaps he doesn't want you ever to repeat what Jem Essick whispered in your ear as he died in your arms at sundown."

She turned, and hurried away toward the wagons whose arched tilts loomed against the dull glow of the campfires.

Lang stared after her. Grace Pope's warning had opened a sudden, startling

line of speculation in his mind. He was remembering now that no one else had heard Jem Essick's last attempt to talk. Those gasped, rambling words had been meaningless to Lang. Yet anyone watching him might suspect that Jem Essick might have been making a damningly lucid statement.

Lang began to sense that back of all this was something huge, and black and formless, and that he had unknowingly drawn cards in a game he was forced to play blindfolded, not knowing his opponents, or their strength or purpose. Not knowing even the size of the stake.

He was tense now, every perception on edge. This residue of Cheyenne Street was dismal, and the only light was the faint glow that seeped around the tightly-blinded windows in the few scattered shacks around him.

He moved along these shacks, as he headed back toward the heart of town. He watched closely the point where he had glimpsed that movement a few minutes earlier.

It came then. He saw something glint in the darkness across the street. He was dropping flat as a gun bellowed twice from that point.

He heard the bullets tear through the flimsy front of the building behind him. He jerked his Navy pistol, fired three times. But it was blind shooting, and he knew he had wasted his lead.

He rolled off the sidewalk, around the corner of the shack, and lay there waiting, watching. The raucous voice of a woman screamed an oath back of one of the blinded windows. Inmates stirred in other shacks, then went silent, waiting.

After long seconds Lang, seeing or hearing nothing retreated farther back through weedy vacant lots. He arose, circling through darkness, and after a block or two, cut back and returned to the lighted street.

He moved with passing men, losing himself among them, using them as unwitting shields until he reached the corner of the sidestreet the Negro bellhop had mentioned.

As he turned into it he again glimpsed that well-dressed, heavy-faced man with the gray cape slung over his arm, among the strollers on Cheyenne Street.

CHAPTER THREE

Trail of Blood

LANG found the house with the velvet-draped windows only half a dozen doors off Cheyenne Street. It was a flimsy, single-story structure, evidently intended as a store, and built flush against the packed clay sidewalk. Many fine carriages, with liveried drivers dozing on the seats were tied up along this street.

He moved into the shelter of the recessed doorway, opened the door, and found himself confronted by another inner door, guarded by a shining black, six-foot Negro in gold-braided livery.

The doorman uneasily eyed Lane's gun, and his plain garb. "You all got a card o' introduction, suh?" he demanded.

"Yeah," Lang said. "Engraved by Uncle Sam."

The doorman's face exploded into a wide grin as he pocketed the gold coin Lang tossed him. "Welcome, suh," he chuckled, opening the inner portal. "Welcome to Lady Midnight's Faro Pa'lor."

The room was long and low-ceilinged. The bare studs of the walls were hidden by a covering of green cloth, and made luxurious with oil paintings and tapestries that showed the taste of a connoisseur. Expensive velvet drapes blanked out the windows, and Lang's boots sank an inch into the carpet.

A hidden stringed orchestra played softly. Six faro tables were in operation. Faro, the gambling game that offers the best odds to the plunger, was the only play in this place.

Dealers and case keepers were in evening dress, as were many of the players. There was a liberal sprinkling of army officers around the tables. Negro maids in starched white caps and aprons, served champagne. The place was hushed, genteel, and there was no piker play at any of the tables.

A comely Negro girl came hurrying. "I'll take yo hat, suh. But Lady Midnight don't let gen'lemen wear theah guns inside, if you don' mind."

"You can have the hat," Lang said. "I'll keep the gun."

He was singled out as being out of place

here. Players were glancing up and nudging each other.

Lang walked toward the farthest table. Players there were patently men of power and money, and among them were two cavalry colonels.

A woman sat in the dealer's chair. A jet-black evening gown set off the full ivory texture of her bare arms and shoulders. She had a white gardenia in her hair, which was rich and thick and dark, with that delicate tinge of gray that adds to the beauty of some mature women.

Lady Midnight looked up. Her eyes, wide-spaced, dark and clear, carried a haunting sadness.

For an instant she sat there looking at Lang. Then she arose swiftly, a sudden pleasure and hope lighting her face.

Gathering the train of her skirt, she came hurrying around the table.

"Lang. Lang Targee! What a surprise!"

While the onlookers gaped she drew him down and kissed him.

"It's been a long time, Lady," Lang said.

"Nearly two years, Lang. It was in Santa Fe wasn't it?"

Lang looked around, and she understood. She led him into a small private room at the rear and closed the door.

"You were enough to make a man's heart turn flip-flops at Santa Fe," Lang told her. "Before that you were the toast of San Francisco. When I came in with a wagon outfit. An' I remember down in San Antone how the rich cattlemen were followin' you around with that dyin' calf look in their eyes. Placerville, Los Angeles, Yuma, El Paso. And still you grow more beautiful, Lady."

She waved him to a deep easy chair, but she remained standing, studying him a strange expression in her eyes.

"Where did you come from this time, Lang?"

"From the Cherry Creek country, on purpose to see you, Lady."

She moved nearer to him, looking down, her cheeks pale. "You have something to tell me, Lang. You didn't ride seven hundred miles just to mention to a woman many years older than yourself that she is beautiful."

"You saved my life once, Lady," Lang said slowly. "I'd have died with that Apache arrow in my back, there in that lonely stage station on the Pecos, if you hadn't got off that stage and stayed there with me. You risked being scalped, living there alone for two weeks with a delirious, wounded young freighter who had been deserted even by his own outfit."

She kept watching him as Lang pulled out a cigar, examined it a long time before speaking again. "Lady, I've been forced to kill a couple of men here and there along my back-trail. They needed killing, but seeing a man die by your own hand is something you never forget—day or night."

Her dark eyes remained unwavering and inscrutable.

"It's tougher," Lang continued, "for a woman to kill a man, even though he might have it coming. It would be hell on a woman."

"You've found him, Lang," she said icily. "Tell me."

Her lips were gray, frozen. All the color had gone from her aristocratic face, but she stood there, a woman of iron will and unswerving purpose. Then before he could speak, she placed her fingers on his lips.

"Wait, Lang. I'll tell you my story.I've never spoken of my past to anyone. But you have a right to know. Then you can decide for yourself whether you should tell me."

★

SHE sat on the arm of the chair, took his hand in both of hers. "After I had nursed you back to life that time on the Pecos I asked only one favor. I told you that if you ever came across a man with a heart-shaped scar on the back of his left hand to let me know. You are the only person from whom I have ever asked help.

"I am forty-one years old now. Eighteen years ago I was living in St. Louis, the wife of Charles Meloy, head cashier in the Western National Bank, one of the biggest institutions west of New York City.

"We had married when I was seventeen, and our only child was nearly four years old. Charles was apparently devoted to me, and to little Constance. We were prosperous, gay, and very happy.

"Before I married Charles Meloy, I had been courted by Gordon Emmons, who was also a cashier in the same bank. But Charles was the man I loved, and married. My husband and Gordon Emmons were close friends. As far as I know my husband was not aware that Gordon Emmons had tried to force his attentions on me even after I had married.

"Charles and Gordon Emmons were together all the time. Then I began to hear that my husband was gambling heavily. Gordon Emmons was the first to hint to me that Charles was playing for high stakes that were arousing comment.

"One evening my husband sent word he would be unable to accompany me to a dinner party to which we had been invited. He said he was being delayed by a business matter. I went to the dinner alone, leaving little Constance asleep in her bed, with a nursemaid in the house.

"I came home late. The nursemaid was asleep. But Connie's room was empty. She was gone—stolen! I notified the police and they began a search. My husband was missing also. And the next day it developed that Gordon Emmons had vanished too.

"When the police investigated Emmons' disappearance they found a letter he had written which was to be opened only in case of gravest emergency. They opened it.

"In that letter Emmons said that if anything happened to him my husband, Charles Meloy, would be responsible. Emmons wrote that my husband was more than one hundred thousand dollars short in his accounts at the bank, having gambled the money away.

"Emmons' letter said that only he knew of my husband's embezzlements, and that he had been trying to help Charles raise enough money to cover the shortage, but without success. When he wrote that letter he feared my husband meant to try to kill him, and shift the blame of the embezzlements upon him."

Lady Midnight's voice was dry and husky. "A week later the charred corpse of a man was found under a pile of burned brush on a farm twenty miles from St. Louis. The body was burned beyond all chance of identification, but a finger ring, a gold watch, and a few other pocket trinkets, as well as the remains of the shoes, were identified as those that Gordon Emmons had carried.

"The fact that my baby had been taken away at the same time was additional proof. A nation-wide search was started for Charles Meloy and a child. But no trace of them was ever found."

She quit talking. "The scar?" Lang questioned.

"It was nearly a year later when a backwoods doctor from the Missouri border came to me in St. Louis. He had just happened to hear the story, and it recalled something to him. He told me that one night about the time of my husband's disappearance, a man had called at his place with an infected hand which he treated and bandaged. The hand had been burned recently, leaving a heart-shaped red scar, but had become inflamed again.

"The man was driving a top buggy, and he was so bearded and muddy the doctor could not remember much about his real appearance. It was raining that night, with lightning and thunder, and the doctor recalled having seen the face of a child answering my baby's description, looking through the rear glass in the top, as the man drove away. The doctor never gave the matter a second thought until he happened to hear about the Emmons murder case, nearly a year later."

She buried her face against Lang then, fighting off tears. "Now you know the story of how Louise Meloy became the notorious Lady Midnight," she said brokenly, "and why I have wandered from boom town to mining camp year after year. I became a gambler, because he had a passion for gambling. I have always felt that it would be in a gambling house I would find him."

Lang lifted her face. "It may be another disappointment. There might be two men in the world with such a scar."

"Then I will keep on searching."

"Wouldn't it be better to let the past stay buried, Lady?"

"I want to know what became of my baby, Lang. At least you can't deny me that right."

Lang was grimly silent a moment. He happened to know that this queenly woman, whose beauty still made her desirable to many men, always carried a loaded der-

ringer in her bosom and a knife in a garter scabbard. Beneath her full, lush beauty burned an implacable purpose. Wronged, heart-broken, robbed of her child, disgraced by the man she had worshipped, Lang knew she was capable of taking vengeance in her own hands, of killing the man who had brought this tragedy upon her.

"Never forget," he said, "that he is also the father of your own child."

Then he added slowly. "I saw the man with the scarred hand in the Golden Dragon gambling house in Denver City six weeks ago. He was playing roulette. I learned that his visits are irregular, but that he always visits the Golden Dragon when he is in Denver. He looks about fifty; wears a heavy, graying beard and dark glasses. He dressed well, but quietly. There is nothing out of the ordinary about him, except the scar.

"Then I'm signing on with you," Lang said, "as your bullwhacker."

"Oh, Lang! It's enough that you traveled so far to tell me this, without turning right around and heading back across the plains."

"I got rested up after I saw you," Lang grinned.

She kissed him again. "Why," she smiled, "hasn't some girl corraled you long before this?"

"Maybe one will before long," Lang chuckled, "if I can stick my head in her loop when she throws it."

"You really mean it, don't you? Lang Targee, who has left so many broken hearts on his backtrail you could walk to California stepping on the pieces, has fallen at last. Who is she?"

"Name of Grace Pope. She's traveling with the Shepherd Company."

Then Lang's eyes clouded. For the moment the memory of those two attempts on his life had been pushed into the background. Suddenly life was sweeter than it had ever seemed to him in all his active past.

"I'll be on hand in the morning," he said. "In case I don't show up, good-bye, Lady."

She held him, frightened. "I didn't like the way you said that, Lang. Are you expecting something might happen to you before morning?"

He laughed. "Adios, then," he said.

He opened the door. And standing by one of the faro tables as a spectator, but placed so that he was facing the door from which Lang stepped was that heavy-faced prosperously-garbed trader from the wagon camp with the gray cape slung over his arm.

Warning jangled through Lang. He spoke swiftly, curtly over his shoulder. "Get away from me, Lady. Stand clear."

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"He has plenty of dust to back his play. They say he owns a mine somewhere in the mountains. He goes by the name of Blood—Oliver Blood."

Lang gave a start. "Blood!" he repeated tensely. "Blood—blood! Good God!"

For he was hearing again Jem Essick's incoherent, dying words: ". . . . blood . . . . blood's . . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Blind Bullets

LADY MIDNIGHT was staring at him. "What—?"

Lang shook his head. "Nothing," he said abruptly. "Just a passing thought."

"There is a wagon train pulling out in the morning for the mountains called the Shepherd Company," she said. "I will join it. I'll buy a wagon and outfit tonight."

He heard her obey instantly, and unquestioningly, for she had seen much of gunplay and of death in her wanderings, and she had learned to know the swiftness with which these things came.

The man with the cape, gave Lang only one casual glance. Then he shifted his position as though to gain a better view of the play on the table beside which he stood. But he was against the wall, and in moving his shoulder caught the corner of one of the window drapes, pulling it aside apparently by accident, and holding it clear as he leaned against the wall, leaving the glass exposed.

Lang caught a glimpse of a black-masked face outside that window, and for the third time flung himself aside in time to escape a bullet. Glass crashed as he leaped, and the slug whined through the open door across the room in which he had talked to Lady Midnight.

Lang's six-shooter was in his hand, blasting an instant echo to that shot that had been fired at him.

He sent five slugs smashing through the flimsy wall just below that window frame, at about the height of the chest of a man standing on the ground. He spaced his slugs six inches apart, planting them in a line that could have been laid out with a ruler.

The concussions made a long, nerve-stunning roar, and gunpowder swirled through the room as men dove to cover.

Lang had been moving as he riddled that wall, searching for an opponent he could not see. He went to the front of the room, out of line of that opening.

His gun was empty, and he slipped his last fresh cartridge into it with swift fingers.

The cape-carrying man had left his position now. Simulating panic he started to crawl to cover beneath a table.

"Never mind the play-acting, mister," Lang said icily. "Stand up and talk! You shoved that drape aside so your partner out there could notch me. Maybe you did a little shootin' at me on your own account earlier in the evenin'. You've been follow-in' me ever since I left the Prairie House."

The man rose slowly, turning with that cape-covered arm toward Lang.

And Lang fired. The bullet tore through the linen stock the man wore. The slug punched him back, and as he reeled, a gun beneath the cape exploded, blasting a bullet into the thick carpet.

The man was dead when Lang walked down the room and stood over him. Powdersmoke drifted from the folds of the cape through which he had tried to fire a hide-out gun at Lang.

Lang walked out of the gambling house, past the cowering doorman. Reaching the sidewalk he moved to the corner, peered around it down into a vacant lot next to the building. A huddled shape lay there a few paces from the window through which the ambush had been sprung. Lang walked to it, looked down at the body which lay there, and saw the two bullet holes in the bushwhacker's chest. A pair of his slugs, fired blindly through that wall, had found their target.

He went back into the gambling house. Lady Midnight, cool and collected, came to his side. "Are you all right, Lang?"

He nodded, and she began calming the guests as Milt Duvall arrived. He looked at the body on the floor, and then at Lang. "I saw the trouble brand on you the minute I looked at you, Targee. Mixed up in one killin', a shootin' scrape, an' now another killin' on your own hook—all inside three or four hours' time!"

"You'll find another dead man outside that window," Lang said.

"Holy cats! You really have had a busy day, fella," Duvall snorted, and went striding out.

He returned dragging by the shoulders the body of a man in rough, bullwhackers' garb. Duvall pulled down the black silk neckerchief that masked the man's lower features, revealing an unshaven, hard face.

"I never saw either of 'em in my life until tonight," Lang said. "That jigger with the gray cape was a witness to Jem Essick's murder at the wagon camp this evening, but as far as I know I had never laid eyes on him before. If you ever learn why they tried three times to rub me out, Duvall, let me know. I'm real curious."

Lang walked to where the gray clad man lay and pulled the cape free from his stiffening arm. The fabric still reeked of powder fumes, and Lang extinguished a small smoulder of fire around one of the bullet holes torn in the garment.

But there were bullet holes in the cape not quite as fresh as these. He tossed the cape to Milt Duvall, pointing out the evidence.

"At least we know now who shot Jem Essick in the back," he said. "There are two sets of bullet holes through that cape. That's why nobody could tell just where the shot came from. The cape muffled the flash and the sound."

"You better come along with me," Targee," Duvall said, "for safe-keepin' at least."

"I'll vouch for Lang Targee, Milt," Lady Midnight spoke. "I've known him a long time."

Milt Duvall eyed Lang with new respect. "That's good enough for me. But he'll bring you trouble, Lady—he's the kind that trouble loves. There'll be a howl from the other side of town in the mornin'. They'll want you closed up. Leavenworth is growin' fed up on killin's."

"I'm closing this place tonight, Milt. Right now, in fact. So they won't need to send their reformers to denounce and leer at me. I'm heading for Denver City in the morning."

"I hate to lose you, Lady," Milt Duvall said with genuine regret. "But I can't say the same for Targee. My sympathy goes to whoever has to ride herd on him in Denver City."

Lang stood there looking down at those two bodies, wondering if this ended it, wondering if he would live long enough to see Denver City again. . . .

★

AT DAWN, Reverend Perry Shepherd conducted the burial services over the grave into which the body of Jem Essick was lowered. Lang, with Lady Midnight at his side, bowed his head as the minister offered up a prayer, and he listened to the hymn that Grace Pope sang.

Only a handful of old-timers, who had known Jem Essick in the past, attended the services, and their interest was mainly on Lang and his companion, for the story of the double killing at Lady Midnight's faro parlor was common knowledge now.

A few minutes earlier the minister had also officiated at the burial of the two victims of Lang's guns, who were laid to rest in another corner of Leavenworth's Boothill.

The minister had told Lang and Milt Duvall that the heavy-faced man had given the name of Daniel Greene when he joined the Shepherd Company.

Marshal Duvall had done some investigating. "This Daniel Greene was in partnership with a tough, bull-necked party named Jules Rosier," he had told Lang. "Rosier says their wagon is loaded with flour, which they aim to trade in the diggings. But I never seen flour packed in whiskey barrels. The other jigger you snuffed out went by the name of Sim Peters, accordin' to Rosier. Peters had been hired out to swamp for 'em on the trip to the mountains."

"Whiskey runners, maybe." Lang speculated.

"Men trading whiskey to the Injuns don't buy the best brand of Kentucky likker," Duvall shrugged. "I saw the labels on the barrels. That load is meant for white men who are particular what they drink; men who have the money to pay for it. An' I saw some kegs of powder an' bars of lead in that wagon too. I don't reckon they're whiskey traders."

Duvall had eyed Lang queerly. "This Jules Rosier is hard formation," he added significantly. "He claims he don't know why his partner and the swamper tried to ambush you; washes his hands o' the whole affair. He's goin' on to the diggings with the wagon, startin' this mornin' with the Shepherd Company. Rosier has got two more curly wolves workin' for him to whack bulls an' swamp. Maybe you better not sleep too sound at nights on that trip, Targee."

Perry Shepherd, his wide shoulders looming against the dawn sky concluded the last words over Jem Essick. He added a final admonition as he fixed his gaze accusingly on Lang and Lady Midnight.

"And forgive the sins of the living, oh, Lord," he intoned, "and lead them away from bloody violence and the passion for games of chance, and into the paths of peace and righteousness."

He moved back then, offered his arm to Grace Pope. But she came instead to Lang, extending her hand. Shepherd followed reluctantly, halting a pace away.

"It is my pleasure to present Lady Midnight," Lang said. "Miss Grace Pope, and Reverend Perry Shepherd."

"I will pray for your salvation, madam," Shepherd said sternly. "And for yours, Targee."

"I am sure," Lady Midnight responded gently, "that prayers from so sincere a person will receive attention. Thank you, Doctor—you are a doctor of divinity, I believe. A graduate of the Philadelphia Theological Institute. And you rejected a very prominent parsonage in Boston, preferring a wider field—if one less profitable—for your work."

Shepherd blinked, plainly taken aback. "I did not enter the ministry for profit," he nodded stiffly. "And as you say, there is a wider field here. Now Miss—Miss Pope. We must hurry. It's time the caravan was getting under way."

"One moment," Lady Midnight said. "May I ask your indulgence in permitting me to join the Shepherd Company for the overland journey? I have a stout new Pittsburgh wagon, and four span of oxen which I am sure will hold their own. Lang Targee has consented to act as my wagon boss."

Perry Shepherd met that issue without quibbling. "You are a gambler by choice, and Targee has figured in the violent deaths of three men in little more than twelve hours. I would prefer that you await another company."

"That may mean days or perhaps weeks of delay, Reverend. I promise I will not open a faro bank on the trail, and that my language will stay within the bounds of modesty. I will not attempt to fleece a single member of the company, nor even use my black wiles upon you in an attempt to soften your opinion of me. Both Lang and I will be models of deportment, I assure you."

The big minister glared, seeing the mischievous twinkle deep in the gambling woman's dark eyes. Lang could understand that Shepherd was utterly unable to reconcile his preconceived picture of Lady Midnight with this surprisingly witty and cultured woman.

Grace Pope exchanged glances with Lang. Her lips were quivering, as she tried to hide a sudden, bubbling amusement.

"You've met a tartar, Reverend," she said with suspicious meekness. "Surely you are not afraid of Lady Midnight's power? It will be a test for you. You may even convert her, perhaps, before we reach the mountains."

She took Shepherd's arm. "It's all arranged," she added, and her glance rested approvingly for an instant on Lang. "The entire company will have to vote on it, of course, but that is only a formality, if Dr. Shepherd says it is all right."

Perry Shepherd cleared his throat, tried to keep from looking at Lady Midnight. "It would be uncharitable to refuse," he conceded stiffly.

★

BULLWHIPS were cracking in the clear dawn light as Lang drove Lady Midnight in a rented top buggy down to the flats. The first wagons were heaving into motion.

The familiar cry of "Stretch out!" sent Lang's memory racing back over a thousand camps and a thousand mornings when the wheels began rolling toward California, or Santa Fe, or Mexico, for he had ten years of it back of him. He had crossed the frontier for the first time when he was only sixteen. His blood never failed to surge in response to that call to distant horizons.

Lady Midnight, by some magic which Lang suspected was based on the liberal use of cash, had become the owner overnight of four yoke of powerful red oxen, and a new Pittsburgh prairie wagon, gleaming in its unsullied varnish and paint, its white tilt rearing like a banner.

He turned his spare saddle horse and pack animal over to the stock guards, who would bring up the rear with loose stock, and tied his saddle mount to the tail of the wagon. He helped Lady Midnight aboard where she busied herself setting up comfortable quarters among the trunks and provisions and faro equipment which had previously been loaded in the vehicle.

Lang tried out the new sixteen-foot bullwhip which the former owner presented him in turning the outfit over to his care. He sent the lash streaking out, picking off blades of grass with pistol-like reports.

"A little oil an' she'll handle pretty," Lang grinned.

The caravan, forty wagons strong, was stretching out amid the sullen rumble of hoofs and wheels. Women were waving and weeping as they looked back at Leavenworth. Banjos began plunking madly.

"Pikes Peak Or Bust!" a stentorian bullwhacker bellowed. And the words were echoed as a battle call from a hundred throats.

Perry Shepherd's voice began booming like a great organ: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. . . ."

From pilot wagon to cow column the hymn was taken up, the refrain carrying across the prairie in a vibrant, living challenge.

The Shepherd Company was rolling—rolling toward the Rocky Mountains which lay nearly two months away beyond a sea of prairie and plains, guarded by the jealous Cheyenne and the buffalo.

Lang looked far ahead and saw Grace Pope standing in Perry Shepherd's wagon, her head above the top where she had turned the canvas back from the forward hoop. She singled him out at that distance, lifted a hand in gay salute.

Lang's whip popped like a gun, and his step was long and light.

Then he saw the thin-legged, mustached man in buckskin breeches who rode a dun horse in the pilot position alongside Perry Shepherd.

Lang's grin faded. In the excitement of the start he had momentarily almost forgotten that Dex Spain had been hired to guide the Shepherd Company through to the mountains.

Lang singled out the wagon in which the dead Daniel Greene had been a partner. He hawed his bull team into line directly behind it, taking time to study the man called Jules Rosier, who had been the partner of the mysterious Daniel Greene.

Rosier was a bull-necked man, wearing a grimy Army shirt, slovenly buckskins, and hide boots. His coarse, Indian-black hair hung long and matted over his low forehead. He had a thin, pock-marked assistant, and presently Lang noticed that another unsavory-looking traveler, in butternut shirt and moçassins, was with that wagon.

They formed a foul-tongued crew. Though they didn't glance in Lang's direction he knew they were fully aware of his presence near them.

The wagon they drove was battered by much travel, and their oxen were nondescript, grass-fed stock. The hard-faced, cursing trio all packed side guns, and had new Henry repeating rifles slung on the wagon in scabbards within quick reach.

They were too handy with their bullwhips, and Lang pitied the oxen they hazed along mercilessly.

Another wagon in the center of the double column aroused Lang's interest. It had a crew of six heavily-armed men, but of a far different type than the foul-mouthed men with the Greene wagon. These six men stayed always near their wagon, and paid strict attention to their own business. They took turns with the bullwhip, and at other times rode the wagon, or trailed along mounted on big, well-kept saddlehorses.

"If you're lookin' at what I think you are, tall feller," volunteered a bullwhacker named Bill Bunting, who was coupled with Lang in the double column, "don't git too curious. Nobody's supposed to know this, but I happened to be awake in my soogans near that wagon when it was loaded long after midnight. I heard that there's near a quarter o' a million dollars in fresh-minted federal gold in that big prairie schooner. It's bein' sent to Denver City where a new national bank is bein' opened. Them slit-eyed gents are professional treasure guards, with orders to shoot first an' ask questions afterwards."

"That," Lang commented, "would be quite a haul for old Black Kettle, the Cheyenne war chief."

"Or fer anyone else, mister. But I wouldn't want any part of a gun-fracas with thet outfit. Fightin' is their business."

The wagons rolled on. A cold fury grew inside of Lang as he watched Jules Rosier and his two comrades punish their oxen. Now and then they took turns at a whiskey jug which they kept inside the wagon. Profanity flowed from their tongues in an endless stream.

Lang saw Grace Pope, riding sidesaddle, heading down the line, accompanying Perry Shepherd on an inspection trip.

As the girl and the preacher came within range of the profanity she flushed, said a word to Shepherd, then left him and

rode on back up the line out of that vicinity.

The preacher came jogging on, and reined up, looking at the three slovenly wagonmen. "Take not the name of thy Lord in vain," he reproved. "You befoul the very sunlight with such blasphemy."

The three stared, then guffawed. "So help me, he's givin' us a sermon, boys!" Jules Rosier chortled. "I betcha he'll be passin' the collection plate. Here's one offerin'."

Rosier pursed his lips, and a stream of tobacco juice made a perfect hit on the toe of Perry Shepherd's saddleboots.

Perry Shepherd dismounted. He removed his black round hat, took off his ministerial collar and coat, and hung them neatly on the saddle horn.

"There comes a time when even the meek are not justified in turning the other cheek," he remarked.

★

HE REACHED out, grasped Rosier's two companions by the ears, and with a heave of his shoulders brought them crashing together, driving the head of one into the jaw of the other. The victim of that battering-ram attack staggered back and fell forward on his face with a howl of pain.

Jules Rosier leaped on Shepherd's back then, wrapping his hairy arms around his throat, pulling his head back in a grip that might have broken the neck of a less powerful man. Perry Shepherd endured that grip without weakening. He whirled trying to shake Rosier loose, but the man clung to him like a leech. And the other man, the thin-necked one, came moving in seeking an opening to gouge and maim.

Lang tossed his whip to Lady Midnight and moved in. He dragged Jules Rosier off the minister.

"Let's get this over, Reverend," he said. "We're delaying the caravan. Every wagon is stoppin'."

Lang moved inside a clubbing punch Rosier drove at him. He smashed a fist into Rosier's soft belly, then hooked a left to the jaw. Jules Rosier spun half-around and pitched forward, rolling almost beneath the hoofs of Lang's lead oxen. He was out cold.

Lang heard a thud like a mallet on a stake, and saw the skinny ruffian topple. Perry Shepherd had landed a Sunday punch.

"Smite them hip and thigh!" the preacher thundered, and waded into the remaining member of the trio, who was now back-pedaling in an attempt to escape. The big minister did not give him a chance to flee. He swarmed upon his quarry, his fists swinging expertly. The man's head bobbed like an apple on a string as those blows landed. With a final punch the preacher knocked him down and out.

Perry Shepherd stepped back, looked around and blew on his knuckles.

Lady Midnight, standing in the wagon bow, had calmly watched the battle. Lang saw Shepherd stare. Lady Midnight wore a simple calico dress, and a little ruffled gingham apron, and had a knitting basket near at hand, and a half-finished woolen sock in her hand.

"I presume you learned to use your fists also at the Theological Institute, Doctor," she smiled. "You were a very apt pupil, I must say.

The big preacher kept staring incredulously. Then he began to chuckle. "Madame, if these ruffians annoy you again with their profanity I will be only too glad to give you additional demonstration of my ability as a pugilist."

He cocked a critical eye at Jules Rosier, and then at Lang. "However I would hesitate," he remarked, "at attempting conclusions with you, Targee, after noticing the efficiency with which you disposed of yon sinner. Again I must comment that you are a son of violence. But I am in your debt."

He extended a hand. His grip was crushing, sincere.

Dex Spain's saturnine face loomed in the background. He did not look directly at Lang, and he turned quickly away, heading back up the line. He had come to investigate the cause of the delay. And Lang understood that Dex Spain wasn't pleased with what he had seen there.

"Go easy with that bullwhip, you three larrupers," Lang warned as the chastised trio revived. "Or I'll send for the preacher ag'in to read you another sermon with his fists."

CHAPTER FIVE

Living Dead Man

LANG spread his bedroll beneath Lady Midnight's wagon that night. But after the camp had gone to sleep he silently abandoned that location, and moved out into a hideout in the brush beyond the camp circle.

He followed that same practice each night as the caravan pushed deeper into the prairie. And he was careful never to make an easy target of himself around the cookfires in the evenings, or against the early light of the chill dawn when the call to stretch out was sounding.

He kept an eye always on Rosier and his pals, and he watched Dex Spain. The three marched in sullen silence now, and were careful of their language, careful of the way they treated their oxen. They kept away from Lang and the big preacher, but their attitude was one of warning rather than reassurance to Lang.

Dex Spain never associated with them, but as the days passed, Lang became certain that Spain knew them far better than he wanted anyone to know. And one night when Lang was bedded down outside the camp he sighted Spain and Jules Rosier with their heads together off in the darkness. They held a brief parley then went back to camp by different routes.

The wheels shoved the slow miles behind them. Each day was a treadmill as they toiled along the rough, hazardous Smoky Hill fork of the Kansas River. The shorter Smoky Hill route was little traveled; the majority of the stampeders preferring the longer journey over the California trail to Julesburg. That route was easier and less open to Indian attack.

New paint and varnish faded under the grinding battle with sand and storm and mud. Wagon tilts began to take on the drab hue of the land through which they crawled. Men and oxen became gaunted, and occassional discouraged outfits began to turn back. Thirty wagons were left when they faced the heart-breaking ascent of the ridge country to the high plains, and there half a dozen move gave up and turned back to Leavenworth.

During those days and nights Lang never relaxed his vigilance. One evening Grace Pope moved close beside him as they sat around the evening fire at Lady Midnight's wagon. Her visits to their wagon had grown in frequency until now she was spending the greater part of her time with Lady Midnight.

And this wagon also held a fascination for Perry Shepherd. In Lady Midnight he found a person qualified to meet him on even terms. Her knowledge of religion and the Bible was an endless wonder to him. Her viewpoints were new and disturbing, opening up subjects for verbal debate at which he found himself hard-pressed to maintain his own position.

The girl now sat there appraising Lang with a somber anxiety. She had told him something about herself as they traveled together.

Her mother had died when she was born, she had said. She had been educated in a private school, and had not seen her father since she was a child so young she had only a vague recollection of him.

Her father was a mining man, and had gone to California in the '49 rush. He was now in the Cherry Creek country, where she understood he had struck it rich. She had received occasional letters postmarked from Denver City, enclosing checks for her expenses, but with few and scant letters about himself.

She was en route now to join her parent, who was almost a stranger to her. He did not know she was coming. She meant it to be a great surprise to him.

Lang, as usual, sat deep among wagon boxes, which served as a shield, leaving him in shadow.

"Lang," she sighed, "Will it always be this way with you—watching, waiting for a shot from the dark?"

Lang saw that her eyes were suddenly wet. "It didn't end in Leavenworth, did it?" she added. "They're still after you, aren't they?"

Lang shook his head. "I don't know. There's been nothing to prove it in nearly four weeks now."

"But you feel it. Who are they, Lang? Why do they hate you so?"

"I only wish I knew," Lang said.

"There—there's nothing in your past that—that—?"

Their eyes met. Lang understood now what she wanted to know. It was her right.

"There's no man in my past who should hate me enough to want to kill me, Grace. Nor any woman who ever loved me that much, nor to whom I ever made a binding promise."

He could have taken her in his arms then, but it wouldn't have been fair to her, not while this unseen thing followed him. He could not obligate Grace Pope to the memory of a man who might be dead before the next sunrise.

She leaned toward him, her lips soft. And Lang shook his head. "No, Grace. No."

She drew away. "I pray for you every night, Lang," she said shakily.

She arose then, kissed Lady Midnight good night, and went to her own wagon quarters. Lang watched that kiss, and it was one of those pleasant things a man remembers. For this girl and this woman who looked young enough to be a sister, and was in reality old enough to be her mother, had been naturally drawn together from the first, and were now inseparable friends.

Lady Midnight retired to the wagon. And Lang looked up to find Perry Shepherd towering over him.

"I cannot permit this thing, Targee," the big minister said sorrowfully. "She is a gentle-bred girl, brought up to the knowledge of shelter and a certain luxury. She has a right to expect these things from the man who marries her. But above all she has a right to expect peace of mind."

"And you believe I could only offer her regret and hardship?" Lang said wearily.

"You are a brave man, Targee. A man I'd want at my side, yea even though I walked through the shadow of death. For you have walked there many times, and will again I fear. Danger and strife is your heritage. As Miss Pope's temporary guardian it is my reluctant duty to point out the wrong you are doing her. She is in love with you."

Lang arose. The emptiness in his eyes brought quick pity to the preacher's stern face.

"I will stay away from her, Shepherd," he said. "You are right."

In that moment he had forgotten everything else, and now stood as an easy target with the firelight as a background.

★

THE bullet from the shadows between wagons was like the smash of a sledgehammer against Lang's side. It sent him reeling against the preacher, who caught him before he went down, dragged him quickly around a wagon to cover to prevent a finishing shot.

He heard Lady Midnight cry out, and the wilder scream from Grace Pope; saw her white face as she came racing through the camp toward him.

The shock of the wound numbed him. Vaguely he felt them lift him into the wagon and begin doctoring his injury, with candle lanterns giving illumination. As though from far away he heard the reports of wagon men who had searched the darkness for the bushwhacker, and found no clew to his identity.

After a long time his head cleared, and found Grace Pope was sitting beside him. She touched his cheek with cool, gentle fingers. "How bad is it?" he asked, his voice thin, and so shaky it made him remember Jem Essick's death.

"Not too bad," Lady Midnight said. "It was a rifle bullet, and it hit your six-shooter, driving the gun into your side. The bullet glanced then and tore an ugly furrow along your back. You'll come back fast, though you'll suffer when the shock of it really begins to hit you."

"You ought to know," Lang murmured. "You pulled me through worse than this at that deserted stage station on the Pecos six years ago. Shepherd, are you here?"

The big minister bent over him. "Drop the wagon sheet," Lang whispered, setting his teeth against gusts of agony. "This is going to be a death scene, and I want all of you to play your parts."

He paused, fighting off pain while he evolved his plan. "Tell the company presently that Lang Targee is dead," he said. "Hold the funeral before daybreak. I believe the ladies can fix up a substitute corpse that can be buried in my place—pillows and some rocks, sewed in a blanket will do the trick. Bill Bunting and some other man you can trust will be the pall-bearers."

They were eyeing him puzzled. "The

shot that hit me was fired from one of those new Henry repeaters," Lang went on. "I've tried out those guns, and know the report they make. Dex Spain carries a Henry. So do those three men that Shepherd and I took to a cleaning that first day out of Leavenworth.

"There's some connection between Dex Spain and those three, and also with that chap I killed in Lady Midnight's faro parlor, who went by the name of Daniel Greene. Greene shot Jem Essick when he tried to denounce Dex Spain that day. Greene then tried to murder me because he feared Essick had told me some secret before he died—a secret that involved not only Dex Spain, but a lot of other people."

"But—?" Perry Shepherd questioned, frowning.

"I am the only man with this caravan—except Dex Spain and probably those three ruffians—who has ever been over the Smoky Hill trail," Lang went on. "With me dead you'll be in Dex Spain's hands, as far as choosing your route goes. When you get up on the plains there won't even be a wheel track to follow. Spain will blaze the trail. I want Dex Spain to believe that I'm dead, so he will feel free to make his next move. Lady Midnight can keep me hidden here in this wagon during the day. I'll do some scouting at night as soon as I can move around."

"Are you saying Spain intends to lead us into some sort of danger?" Shepherd demanded.

"Anything could happen," Lang shrugged.

"My dear sir? What object would they have—? Then Shepherd halted, hit by a startling thought.

Lang nodded. "Sure—you've guessed it! There's a wagon in this outfit carrying a fortune in gold coin. That's motive enough. In the past five years, at least five caravans have been wiped out on the plains. It was taken for granted that it was the work of Cheyennes."

They were listening breathlessly now. "All those outfits were heading from the mountains toward Leavenworth, and they were carrying plenty of gold dust. Up to now, except for three or four genuine Indian attacks which were repulsed, no westbound caravan has been wiped out. Why? Because westbound outfits don't usually carry gold. This is the first gold that's bein' shipped west. Now, you savvy why we're worth luring into an ambush where we can be wiped out to the last man, and to the last woman. Dead men, nor dead women, never talk."

"What manner of men would be so fiendish?"

Lang could have named one he more than half suspected was their leader. Facts were dove-tailing in his mind. Sinister rumors of a secret renegade organization had cropped up in the gold camps the past winter. And Lang, in inquiring about Oliver Blood in Denver City, hadn't learned much. The man always had plenty of gold dust with which to gamble on his irregular appearances in the town, but nobody seemed to know the location of the mine he was presumed to own. And Jem Essick's last words kept rising up in Lang's mind always.

Grace Pope stroked his hair. "You must sleep now," she warned. "No more talking. We'll take care of your funeral. We will see to it that you get a nice burial—and thank God it isn't a real one!"

"You ladies must rest an hour or two," Shepherd said. "My wagon will serve. I believe it would be better to announce Targee's death tomorrow, and hold the services after dark at the next camp. It will give us more time for the arrangements."

★

AFTER the women had gone, Shepherd sat in deep study for a long time. "The girl loves you, Targee," he sighed finally. "She is completely happy only when you are near. Well, it is God's will. And I cannot say any longer that she is making a mistake. You are a remarkable man, Targee. And she is a remarkable girl—as fascinating and lovely as this amazing Lady Midnight. They are so alike in many ways."

He was silent again for many minutes. "Targee?" he suddenly burst out. "Do not take this wrong, but—but I must know one thing. Is Lady Midnight married?"

Lang saw the pallor and strain in the big minister's face. "You've fallen in love with Lady Midnight?" he breathed.

"Yes," Shepherd admitted, anguished.

"A gambler—but an angel. A siren, and a saint. She represents everything I oppose, and she is everything I want, God help me!"

"She's married, Shepherd," Lang said, "but she may be free soon," he added.

The minister's head lifted. "Then there is some hope," he murmured fervently.

"Hope, and perhaps hell—for you. If you love Lady Midnight, Shepherd, prepare to stand by her through the toughest thing a woman can ever face. Think that over."

"Whither are we traveling over this fading trail?" Shepherd sighed. "A wagonload of gold, a minister in love with an enigmatic woman, three dead men on our backtrail, a guide we cannot trust, and assassins in our midst. And now a mock funeral for the man Grace Blood loves—a man marked for death, but will live on as an avenging phantom. . . ."

Lang's head had jerked up from the pillow. He was staring wildly at Perry Shepherd. "What was that name you used? Did you say Grace Blood? *Blood?*"

Shepherd made a wry gesture. "It was careless of me to let that slip. Well, it can't be remedied now. Her real name is Grace Blood, not Grace Pope. She wanted to make sure her arrival in the mountains would be a total surprise to her father. Therefore she adopted another name."

"Her father's name?" Lang said, his voice was dry. "Is it—Oliver Blood?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

Lang sank back. After a time he laughed, and the minister looked at him uneasily, for that laughter seemed to be wrung from utter agony.

"No. I've never met Oliver Blood. . . . Not yet."

Lang lay staring unseeingly up at the canvas hood above him. He knew now why Lady Midnight and the warm-eyed girl had so much in common. They were mother and daughter, flesh and blood.

And it was Lang's belief that Lady Midnight meant to kill the man called Oliver Blood on sight, as vengeance for the years of heart-break and bitterness he had inflicted on her.

Lang tried to hope he was wrong in reading the scattered evidence he had accumulated, but it kept assembling damningly in his mind. Jem Essick's last words, the mystery of Oliver Blood's source of wealth, and the various attempts on his own life.

Jem Essick had died with only one thought on his mind, and that was to name and accuse the men responsible for the things that had happened to him. He had named Dex Spain, and Lang knew beyond doubt now that Jem Essick had been trying to say that Spain was one of Blood's men when life had faded out of him.

The facts made an almost complete pattern. Jem Essick, Lang reasoned, must have been lying among dead men, left for dead himself, and he had seen the faces of the men he had tried to name. It all meant that Grace Blood's father was the leader of a band of merciless trail ghouls.

Lang lay in the unlighted wagon that night back of the canvas curtain Lady Midnight had hung to hide him. He listened to the distant, sonorous voice of Perry Shepherd reading a burial service over the blanket-wrapped effigy that had been lowered into a grave. Grace Blood sang a hymn.

Only the bullwhacker, Bill Bunting, and a tight-lipped man named Tom Dowling, who was leader of the treasure wagon, were in on the secret as they acted as pallbearers. The remainder of the wagon company, including Dex Spain, believed Lang Targee was in his grave.

Lang looked at Lady Midnight, and the comely sweet-faced girl as they entered the wagon after the services, and he wondered if it wouldn't have been a better solution for him if that bullet had gone an inch more to the left.

CHAPTER SIX

Ambush Camp

IN THE days that followed, the girl sensed the wall that had come between them, watched the way Lang drew away from her. He saw the shadow of it grow in her eyes, saw the hurt and the heart-break that she tried to hide. Her visits to Lady Midnight's wagon became less frequent, and finally ceased altogether.

Lady Midnight watched this happen, and Lang saw her suffer along with the girl, not knowing why she should share

so poignantly the travail of another woman.

Lady Midnight could remain silent no longer. "Lang," she implored one night. "Why are you breaking Grace Pope's heart? She loves you. And she's the kind that loves only once."

"I hope," Lang said lifelessly, "that you will never know the answer to that, Lady."

Lang closed his lips then.

The Shepherd Company was on the plains now. There were no wheeltracks to follow on this rolling sea of bunch grass, for wind and rain had erased what traces the few preceding caravans had made. Wagon guides used their own judgment on this monotony of swale and coulee, broken by bleak reefs of rock and yellow, barren hills.

Under Dex Spain's direction men now scouted the country around for Indian sign, but reported nothing alarming.

Lang's recovery was rapid. From his hiding place he kept watch on Dex Spain and Jules Rosier. After a week he was strong enough to leave the wagon after the camp had gone to sleep. And finally, with Bill Bunting's connivance, he managed a twenty-four hour absence between sundowns.

During that sojourn he ranged the plains as far from the caravan as his strength permitted. He satisfied himself that Spain was sincere at least in one thing. There was no Indian sign in the country.

Another week passed, and one afternoon a great shout ran along the travel-weary column.

"Pikes Peak or bust!" men shouted jubilantly.

Thin and low on the horizon lay a faint, hazy shape that might have been a purple cloud, but was in fact the Rocky Mountains, still eighty miles away.

And the next morning Dex Spain veered the route southward.

"Spain says we'll avoid breaks in the plains ahead and find easier going by swinging south a dozen miles or so," Perry Shepherd told Lang.

Lang had traveled this area many times. He knew that the rough country lay to the south in the direction Dex Spain was now leading them. The true trail ran straight west across unbroken plains to where it converged with the route from Julesburg.

From his covert in the wagon Lang watched all day as Spain led the plodding wagons southward. Rough, rock-ribbed hills began to loom ahead, and men lost their jubilation, staring gloomily as they saw that the going wasn't to be as easy as Spain had promised.

The caravan toiled into the shadow of those lowering hills at mid-afternoon. Spain guided the way into a rocky, back-breaking ascent up a notch between slide-scarred ridges, saying they would have better going after a mile or two. But it was evident no wheeled vehicles ever had traveled this route before.

Progress dropped to a snail's pace as men labored with crowbars, clearing a path through the boulders over which the wagons lurched, with teams doubled and working in relays over the worst stretches.

They had advanced less than a mile into this malpais when twilight overtook them. Gratefully, they made camp.

In this narrow canyon it was impossible to form the wagons in the usual frontier circle. The vehicles and the cookfires were strung out for half a mile along the rocky notch in which they were cramped. For the first time since the start from Leavenworth, the Shepherd Company was no longer a compact organization.

Lang left the wagon after dark, and climbed the face of the ridge to the south until he reached a vantage point from which he could look down on all of the scattered wagon fires in the canyon below.

The wagon manned by Jules Rosier and his two tough comrades, was farthest down the line, having fallen back during the day for repairs.

Lang saw Dex Spain appear on foot, within reach of the firelight at that wagon. The four men conferred a moment. Then all of them headed into the darkness. And every man was carrying a Henry rifle.

Presently Lang heard them ascending the rocky ridge somewhere off to his right. He moved cautiously in that direction, guided by the sounds they made. The pursuit carried him to the sawtooth rim.

There he caught a clear glimpse as they crossed a prominence that stood in bold relief against the last glow of daylight. But there were five men in the party now

—and one of them was unfamiliar to Lang.

He followed them by ear, and became sure as the chase went on that the fifth man was a guide who was leading Spain and the others to some unknown destination.

Lang followed them nearly two miles along the ridge, glimpsing them occasionally against the stars. Then he caught the faint reflection of firelight against a rock wall in a draw ahead. One of the men he was following called out, and an answer came from the draw.

The five descended toward the firelight. Lang crept ahead, careful not to displace a loose rock as he moved nearer. A cut-bank finally barred his descent, and he crawled on his stomach to its lip and looked over.

He was peering down a hundred-foot slant into a small gulch, floored with the white sand of a dry stream bed.

A score or more men squatted or moved around a fire which blazed there. They formed as evil a crew as he had ever seen. A few had the earmarks of tinhorn gamblers, and some were of the buffalo-hunting pattern, dressed in greasy buckskins. Others wore miners' red shirts and thick boots, and a few looked like down-at-the-heel traders or politicians. Every man was hung with guns and knives, and had Henry repeaters. Lang knew he was looking at a cross-section those who had flocked into the gold camps to prey upon other men.

A broached keg of whiskey sat on a rock and tin cups were being passed around. In the background loomed a hobbled saddle string, and many mules, rigged with empty packsaddles.

Dex Spain and his companions walked into that assembly and received loud and boisterous greetings.

Now a new and more imposing figure stepped from the background, and shook hands with Spain. The man was gray-haired, and wore the rough clothes of a miner. But he looked softer than the others, less accustomed to the sun and hard riding. The last time Lang had seen this man he was wearing the broadcloth of a wealthy mining man, and was playing for high stakes in the Golden Dragon gambling house in Denver City.

He was Oliver Blood, who bore a heart-shaped scar on the back of his left hand. It was that scar that had sent Lang on that long round-trip to Leavenworth to find Lady Midnight.

Lang felt empty inside. He lay there watching those whiskey-inflamed men strip off their clothes, and smear their bodies with a brownish stain that was mixed in buckets. They began donning breechclouts, and dabbing themselves with war paint, and arranging feathers in their hair.

He turned away, sick at heart, and retraced his route to the wagon camp.

He made his way to the wagon beneath which Perry Shepherd was asleep, and awakened him.

"Trouble ahead," he said, "and we haven't got too much time. Round up Tom Dowling, and a few others for a pow-wow."

Shepherd went hurrying away when a soft voice spoke Lang's name. The girl, a robe over her night-dress, pushed the wagonsheet aside, and descended beside him.

"Lang," she said. "I heard what you told Doctor Shepherd. If there is danger, I believe I have a right to ask this? Why did you turn away from me. After—after—?

What she wanted to say was that after she believed he had fallen in love with her. But she couldn't bring herself to put it in words.

Lang fought back the overwhelming desire to take her in his arms, and that was the toughest battle he had ever won over himself.

"Grace," he said, "whatever happens I hope you will forgive me, and understand why I had to do this. There are so many lives at stake here."

He left her then, not daring to remain so close to her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gun-Ghost of the Past

THE men Shepherd brought to where Lang waited in the shadows, stared, startled, as they recognized him.

"You're not seeing a ghost," Lang told them. "I didn't die. That funeral in the

Ridge country was a fake. Listen close: Dex Spain has led us into an ambush. The outfit is going to be jumped by about thirty men, painted as Indians. They're white men. Every one will have a brace of six-shooters, and a repeating Henry."

He looked at Tom Dowling, who was in charge of the treasure wagon. "I reckon you know the kind of bait that attracts trail-wolves, Dowling? That's what they're after. They must have a big organization, for they evidently had advance information as to what was being sent out to the mountains with this caravan.

"Dex Spain was planted with this outfit as a guide, and he's steered you into a spot where you'd have been easy pickings. It's my guess that Spain guided Jem Essick's party into just such an ambush. Only Essick lived long enough to face Dex Spain, and try to accuse him.

"Jules Rosier and those other two are in on it. They traveled with the train to back up Spain in case he needed help. Their wagon is loaded with whiskey, and ammunition for use in other massacres in the future, I reckon. I trailed 'em to where they made their rendezvous with the attacking party. They're only a couple miles away and when I last saw 'em they were putting the finishing touches on the disguises.

"Get every woman out of those wagons, and take 'em to safety up in the hills to the north. Send four or five men along to protect them. Tell every other man to get their guns and powder and lead pouches. Have 'em fake up their beds with rocks and logs so it'll look like they're still asleep around the wagons. Work fast, and quiet."

The camp aroused quietly, and there were minutes of suppressed but feverish activity as the plan was carried out.

Lady Midnight found Grace Blood, and they helped organize and calm the five other women in the party. Lady Midnight came to where Lang was directing operations, laid a hand on his arm, and stood peering into his face.

"Lang," she said slowly. "You've been keeping something from me for many days. Do you want to tell me now?"

"No, Lady," Lang said with an effort. "Hurry now. The other women are ready."

She kissed him on the lips. Perry Shepherd had come up. Lady Midnight turned, placed her hands on the big minister's cheeks, drew his face down, and kissed him also. "It is my turn to play for you, Perry," she murmured.

The girl looked at Lang, her eyes somber. When Lang neither spoke nor moved toward her, she turned wearily away with Lady Midnight, and they joined the other women who were being escorted to safety.

Lang appraised his forces. There were a scant two-score of able men left in camp, and the majority had only single-shot muzzle loading rifles, or six-shooters. Few were equipped with both types of weapons.

"Make every shot count," Lang warned them. "You outnumber them, but they've got better guns, more bullets. And they're old hands at this game. This isn't the first outfit they've massacred. Wait until I give the word to fire, then shoot to kill.

"Spread out now, and take to the rocks. Hunker down and stay out of sight. They'll come with a rush. Dowling, you and Bill Bunting and a few others pile up heaps of dry, inflammable grass and brush. Sprinkle the piles with gun powder and lay trails of powder to where you're hiding. Get flint and steel ready, and when the attack comes touch off the powder.

"There are kegs of it in Rosier's wagon if you need more. The brush fires will give us light to shoot by. The rest of you form a circle back in the rocks all around camp. Let 'em come through into camp, so they'll be surrounded, and be in the firelight when the brush flares up. And keep your heads."

With Tom Dowling's expert help, Lang stationed his men so they would have a clear field of fire at every strategic point. Lang particularly saw to it that the area around the treasure wagon was covered. Lang was the last to go into hiding. He settled down back of a boulder alongside Perry Shepherd.

There was an exalted look in the minister's face. Lang knew he was remembering the way Lady Midnight had kissed him.

"Lady Midnight's real name is Louise Meloy," Lang said. "I have every reason to believe that Grace Blood is her daughter, and that her name isn't Grace Blood,

but that she was baptized as Constance Meloy. I am telling you this now in case I am killed in this fight."

Shepherd stared at him thunderstruck. "The girl doesn't dream that Lady Midnight may be her mother. Whether Lady Midnight suspects, I can't say. But there is one thing I never want either of them to know—or see. Make sure that neither of them ever look upon the face of the man who is leading these renegades tonight. Promise me that."

Lang lifted a warning hand for silence then, halting the stunned questions Perry Shepherd was framing.

Shepherd heard it then too—the sibilant murmur of movement from somewhere. A pebble rattled down the ridge to the south. A twig snapped.

It came then—with a thunderous impact. Men swarmed down the ridge upon the scattered wagon camp. They came on foot, and spilled among the wagons in a wild, savage flood.

They began screeching, and their guns opened up, riddling the blanket-covered shapes beneath the wagons. Lead ripped through the wagons also, searching mercilessly and blindly for human targets.

Powder trains leaped into life as the defenders in the shadows worked flint and steel.

"Fire!" Lang shouted.

The guns of the wagon men drove a volcanic sheet of flame and screaming lead across that camp. It was a scythe that reaped a terrible harvest. The painted, feathered horde reeled as that furnace-blast tore bloody gaps in their ranks.

The powder trains reached the brush piles, and the scene was etched out in sanguine brilliance.

The killers were caught in their own trap. They tried to turn and escape, only to be met by a new withering fire from the very direction from which they had come as the defenders on the south side went into action.

The renegades forted up back of wagon wheels, shooting at the flashes of guns that ringed them. But they were in the light, and their opponents were shooting slowly, drawing a deadly bead. Death moved among the killers, placing a quick finger on a shoulder here, and a shoulder there, and each summons was followed by the sight of a painted man pitching on his face, or rolling in agony as a slug tore through him.

There were only a dozen survivors now. They massed in frenzied desperation and made a rush, seeking to shoot their way out of that deadly circle. They came toward that point where Lang and Perry Shepherd and a few other wagon men were stationed.

Lang and the minister, their guns empty, reared up with clubbed rifles.

"Live by the sword, and die by the sword!" Perry Shepherd thundered, and then he and Lang were among them like avenging phantoms, their rifles rising and falling.

★

LANG clubbed a painted head into the earth, fought his way to where the minister was surrounded by four frantic renegades. Help arrived then from other wagon men, and the trail pirates broke, scattering for darkness. But they were pursued, and shot down or captured to the last man.

Lang sagged back against a boulder, his knees shaking. His exertions had opened his half-healed wound again, and he saw blood running from his leg below the knee. He discovered that a bullet had scored him deeply there, and he began to realize that he had a badly bruised shoulder.

Perry Shepherd, blood streaming from a knife cut across his forehead, his black coat ripped from his back, cast away the shattered rifle he had been using and looked around.

Eight of the attackers had been taken alive, and there were a dozen wounded lying around. Of the wagon company, two men had been killed, and half a dozen others bore wounds. But all in all, their casualties had been remarkably light.

The girl came racing out of the darkness, followed by Lady Midnight and the other women. She hurried to her wagon, brought water and cloths, and cleansed and bandaged Lang's injuries, her hands steady and deft.

Lang watched Lady Midnight wash the blood from Perry Shepherd's face, and attend his injury.

Lang had seen no sign of Oliver Blood

among that painted horde. He got up now, moving among the fallen men. He identified Dex Spain, who lay with glazed, dead eyes up-turned, hideous in his savage disguise. Jules Rosier was among the dead also, a bullet through his throat. Both of Rosier's comrades were prisoners, and would some day hang for their crimes.

Mingling emotions clashed in Lang, regret that Blood had missed the death he deserved, and relief that the girl would not need to learn the truth at least at this time.

Then he turned, and the issue was settled beyond any interference on his part. For two of the wagon men, who had closed the final jaws of the trap on the south side of camp, came into the circle then, pushing ahead of them a sobbing, gray-haired figure in miner's garb.

It was Oliver Blood.

"Ketched the snake back there in the rocks," one of the captors shouted. "It's the big he-dog himself. He was stayin' in the clear himself, hollerin' orders, an' tried to sneak away when he saw what was happenin' to the rest of his buzzards, but we jumped him."

Before Lang could make a move to stop her, Lady Midnight had walked up to Oliver Blood and stood there to face him.

The man's sobbing broke off as he stared, and then he recoiled, trying to move back away from her.

"Well, Gordon," Lady Midnight said, and there was a bell-like clarity to her voice, "it has taken eighteen years, but I never doubted in my heart but that you were the one I'd find when I came to the end of that trail. You are Gordon Emmons. You murdered my husband, burned his body, and left your own clothing and jewelry there so that the headstone over Charles Meloy's grave would bear your name."

A wild, joyous tumult was welling up in Lang.

"You embezzled that money, and left a letter that placed the blame on a man you had murdered. But that scar on your hand has led me to you, at last. You probably got that scar while you were burning my husband's body on that lonely farm in Missouri.

"And you kidnaped my child, partly to strengthen the evidence against my dead husband, but mainly to hurt me. You always hated me because I married Charles Meloy instead of you. You knew what torture it would be for a mother to live year after year, not knowing whether her child was living or dead."

Lady Midnight had a derringer in her hand. "What did you do with my baby, Gordon? Did you murder her also? Tell me."

Lang caught the derringer, pushed it down. "Meet your daughter, Lady," he said, and he turned her so she was facing the sweet-faced girl.

"Blood—or Gordon Emmons—didn't have the nerve to kill a child—in those days, at least—though he grew a little more calloused as he became the leader of a band of trail raiders these past few years," Lang said. "He even sent the money to educate her. Maybe he dreamed of a time when he could settle down as a gentleman, and every time he looked at the girl who wasn't his daughter he could comfort himself with the knowledge that he had a full revenge on you for rejecting him as a husband."

The girl understood now. With a sob she threw her arms around Lady Midnight. The gambling woman sank to her knees, lifted her smiling, tearful face to the night sky. Her daughter lifted her to her feet and drew her head against her breast.

After a time Lady Midnight looked up, composed and smiling. She turned to Perry Shepherd.

"Your prayers have been answered, Doctor," she said. "I will never gamble again."

"Not all my prayers, Louise," Perry Shepherd said.

They were looking at each other, and warm color began to rise in Lady Midnight's cheeks.

"I believe," she murmured, "that you hardly need prayer to bring the right answer to that, Perry."

She moved to the minister, and his arm went protectingly around her.

The girl's eyes turned to Lang, and he walked to face her, smiling.

"Lang," she sighed. "Oh, Lang!"

Then she was in his arms, clinging to him as though she never wanted to be far away from him again.

THE END

THE RANGE THEY COULDN'T KILL

By Tom W. Blackburn

Bill Traeger was the kind of rawhide ramrod who—once he signed on the Bent Moon—was there for keeps. . . . And neither the threats of the greedy Broken T, the bushwhack bullets of the Cross Yoke, nor the new owner he hated, could make him forget his one grim loyalty.

CHAPTER ONE

Broken Iron

BILL TRAEGER was long-geared and leathery, with the flat eyes and strong, squared mouth of a man who sets a limit in all things and will not go beyond it. His features lacked the regularity of handsomeness, and in repose it lay in a friendless cast. Traeger drank as he worked, and he made talk as he gam-

Traeger said, "I've got to see you before you hit town. . . ."

bled; without the embroidery of banter and easy falsity to which most men clung. There was a singleness of purpose in it all—to feel intoxication, to get a job done, to ask or give answer to a question, to win a stake.

There was directness in Traeger, and an inflexibility. There were other things, too. For one, he believed that a man who rode for an iron owed that iron more than the work of his hands and the sweat of his body. He would have scoffed at loyalty, for it was a soft word behind which men hid many things. But loyalty was bedded deep in his nature and it made him stubborn.

He sat a hammerheaded dun horse, as big-boned and nerveless as its rider. And he shook his head at the three men facing him.

"Josh Spencer hands me my orders like he does my pay, Ferguson," he said to the leader of the trio. "He's given me no traveling papers yet. I doubt if he will. Meantime, this is his range. Drift along, boys. I've got work to do!"

Traeger's voice made no attempt at lightness. The words meant exactly what they said. Get out! As foreman of the little Bent Moon, Traeger wanted no hand from Robin Starr's Cross-Yoke on grass belonging to his iron. Ferguson stabbed a nettled look at him. Then he swung his

leg so that his knee hooked indolently on the horn of his saddle. He leaned a little forward.

"There never was a man so damned tough he didn't need friends, Traeger," Ferguson said softly. "There never will be! We been waiting here to do you a favor. You been on the high ridges three days, and a lot can happen in that time. Either you've got ears that can hear a hell of a lot up in the ridges, or you can guess like a fool! So you don't think old Josh'll give you walking papers, eh? Well, you're right. You'll see when you hit your home place!"

The man stopped and eased his free foot back into his stirrup.

"We'll be at Charlie Payson's tonight. And we'll put in a word with Robbie Starr if you're wanting it, then. She could use another hand—if you'll file the burrs off you!"

Ferguson nodded to the two riders with him. The three started moving, slanting toward the blue smudge of Cascabel, out on the flats. Traeger angled off from them, holding along the ridge toward the next pocket, in which Josh and Ma Spencer had long ago built their tidy house.

As he rode, Traeger's mind built a perspective out of this deliberate meeting with Hal Ferguson and the two other Cross Yoke hands. This was a hard country; the wealth of its grass made it so. Beef stock fattened on these blue hills as on few ranges in the high country. And because this was so, it was natural that men should covet its acres. It was an old saw on the *llanos* that it took red blood to water the best grass, wherever it grew. It was an old saw, but true.

Traeger remembered that three months ago, when he had drifted into the hills above Cascabel, he had a choice of outfits he could have hit up for a job. The Cross Yoke, first, because it was the biggest. The Broken T, because gossip had drifted as far south as Cimarron that Drake Palmer was hiring hands. And the Bent Moon.

The Cross Yoke had been out because Bill Traeger was not a man to hunt trouble and therefore would not work for a woman—doubly so when she was as young and as beautiful as men swore Robin Starr to be. He had passed up the Broken T because he distrusted spreads which reached as wide for hands as Palmer was doing. The Spencer place had been the only one left.

He had no regrets about his choice. Josh Spencer and Ma had no business in these hills. Josh was an old man, and Ma was too gentle to understand what lay here beyond the freshening of her milk cow and the spring growth of the ivy on the log walls of the house in which she had lived so many years.

Josh introduced Traeger in Cascabel as his new foreman. Traeger was solemn about it, making no point of the fact he knew as well as any townsman that Josh Spencer never had been able to afford more than one regular hand on his place in all the years he had worked it.

Having been hired, Traeger's judgment became his employer's for the asking. When Ferguson came, weeks ago, with a cash offer for the Bent Moon from Robin Starr, Traeger had weighed the obviously slashed price against the future for Josh and Ma, saw the cash would give them a modest security, and argued for the sale. But Josh had been the first man above Cascabel and Ma had lived in her house twenty years and the two of them had their pride. Josh refused.

Ferguson came back, this time with a lease offer. Again Traeger counselled taking it—this way Ma could keep her house and Josh would have the home yard in which to putter about. But the rent offered was the same as the government got for the scraggly lava sink to the north, and the Bent Moon was prime graze. So Josh turned this down, too.

Traeger passed no judgment on his boss. But he sensed trouble. Ma sensed it, too, but with the reasonlessness of a woman. The Starr girl was a good one, Ma said. If she was crowding out the boundaries of the Cross Yoke, it was because she was fighting Drake Palmer.

Josh didn't think so. Be it woman or man, a rancher who crowded a neighbor was bad goods from the seam both ways. Robin Starr wasn't fighting Palmer. Hell's bells! Old Tom Starr had figured on marryin' his gal to young Palmer near since the two of 'em were born. With Tom dead, the gal was still fixin' on Drake Palmer, and her trying to buy out

the Bent Moon was her way of giving Palmer a hand, makin' it easy to throw all three spreads in the Cascabel hills together when she and Drake were hitched!

Bill Traeger heard these arguments. With a distrust of a woman's reasoning, he sided with Josh. There was vague talk that the Starr girl was at outs with Palmer, and that their trouble lay with a note Palmer had taken on the Cross Yoke from Tom Starr a few months before he died. There were even a few disinterested bets offered that the girl would whip Palmer cold if she really turned against him. But none of this was Bent Moon business. It lay between the Cross Yoke and the Broken T. Traeger had left it alone.

He had, however, thought much of Ferguson's two offers and the apparent eagerness Robin Starr had shown to take over the Bent Moon. He hadn't wanted to go up into the hills. Bent Moon didn't have thirty head of stuff in the high ridges. But with a good man on his payroll, Josh Spencer liked to talk like a big owner, and he'd made the inspection trip an order.

Well, the order was executed, now. The hills had been carefully combed. What Bent Moon stock there was on the ridges would do till round-up without further attention. But round-up was a long time away.

Traeger knew just how far. Ferguson hadn't taken him in. The man's guarded talk had hidden nothing. Traeger's directness made it possible for him to sift directness from the talk of others. Josh Spencer was dead. And Traeger knew he was riding toward a meeting which no man finds easy—with the dazed widow of a friend.

★

MA SPENCER had been, for the three months he had known her, a plump, pleasant, gray little woman, a bit flighty in her talk, who had proceeded to mother Traeger with the same fussy gentleness she had bestowed on Josh for half a lifetime. Traeger had that picture of her as he rode up to the little house on the Bent Moon. But he found a different woman.

Ma's ruddy color was gone. The lines which had pulled but faintly at her cheeks were suddenly strong and deeply marked. But Ma Spencer was far from the collapse Traeger had expected and feared. Her chin was up. Her eyes met his squarely as he lit down in front of the porch.

"You know about it, don't you, Bill?" she said quietly. Traeger nodded.

Ma didn't force Traeger to ask questions. He was grateful.

"It happened on Arab. No reason, seems like. Josh had rode that horse for six year. Ed Mansfield looked the rig over for me. Said it appeared the saddle had slipped and throwed Josh to one side. Arab dragged him to death."

Traeger folded up on the rail beside Ma's chair.

"Arab's at the corral?"

Ma nodded. "And Ed took Josh into town," she added.

Ed Mansfield was sheriff of Cascabel County. He was one of the old-timers like Josh, and long a close friend of the Bent Moon people. Mansfield's judgment would be good.

"You're going to town?" he asked.

"Tomorrow, Bill. Not tonight. Ed's sister is coming over to stay."

Traeger stood up. "I'll see you at the hotel in the morning, then."

He went back to his dun, swung up, and circled down back of the corral. Dismounting there, he went up to the rail and watched the big bob-tail Josh Spencer had ridden to his death. Somewhere past eight years, Arab was too old to be skittery; he had long ago gotten the last spook out of his system. Yet the old horse was trembling about the withers and flanks like an unbroken yearling. A furrow ridged up on Traeger's brow. He watched the horse a while longer, then turned toward the harness shed.

Arab was acting like a killer horse which had dragged its rider to death. But Traeger knew the horse and a stubborn doubt troubled him. He found Josh's saddle, dumped on the floor of the harness shed. It was a mess—Brush-scratched and scuffed from dragging. Traeger ignored these marks and lifted the bell-toe stirrups.

Traeger remembered Josh's story about how he'd gotten them. A Mexican had hit the Bent Moon the first years the Spencers had been on it. He needed a

stake of cash, and when Josh and Ma had turned out their tea-pot full of coins, he'd left his fancy saddle for security, with its heavy, cast bell-toe stirrups.

When they saw the Mexican again, he was flush and he was grateful. When Josh refused interest on the loan, the Mexican cut the leathers of his stirrups and handed across the bell-toes. Josh had hung them on his own leather and ridden them since.

Traeger had a big man's big feet, four sizes bigger than Josh's. He lifted one of the stirrups and thrust his boot into it. The toe went in smoothly the depth of the bell. He twisted the bell at a dozen sharp angles and the toe came out easily. . . .

Traeger's eyes were bleak when he wheeled away from the Bent Moon. He had an errand. And it might take a bit of doing to be finished with it by the time Ma reached town in the morning.

★

MODEST JOHN HAROLD was Cascabel County's coroner. Like Ed Mansfield and Josh Spencer, he belonged with the beginning of things. There was sickness but little death in the Cascabel hills. Modest John always claimed his knowledge of medicine was too rusty for practice. He relished his county job with its occasional report, referred the ailing among his friends to a younger doctor who had hung his shingle in the town, and took his pleasure from gossip and whiskey.

Hitting Cascabel while there was still light on the street, Traeger knew the folly of hunting Modest John at his dusty office. He rode, instead, up to the rail in front of Charlie Payson's Rattler Saloon. Traeger noted that Hal Ferguson and the two Cross Yoke riders who had been with him out in the hills had not yet arrived. Modest John Harold was belly-up to the bar, engaged in a growling argument with Payson. Traeger interrupted it easily, knowing that Harold never argued in a civil voice, even with his best friend.

"I want to see you, John," he said.

The coroner turned on him with what appeared testy annoyance. "Officially, I hope!" he snapped. "No, you're still breathin'. Come back when you've quit!"

Harold turned back to the grinning Payson, ready to resume where he left off, but Traeger touched his arm and let a little urgency into his voice. "I want to see Josh Spencer, then."

Modest John wheeled again, stabbed a keen look at him, and barked over his shoulder at Payson.

"Charlie, if you pour anybody else a drink out'n that bottle afore I'm back I predict you'll suffer concussion and cranial fracture, induced by a blunt weapon. Namely, my fist!"

The coroner swung toward the door, Traeger tracking his heels. Harold said nothing until he'd turned the lock on his door and pushed into the mustiness of his office. He backed onto the corner of his desk and eyed Traeger levelly.

"Son, this is my night to get God-awful drunk. I just finished gettin' Josh Spencer boxed up. You don't want to see him. Josh went out an awful hard way!"

Traeger nodded understanding, but he repeated his request. "I want to see him!"

Harold shrugged and opened the door into his back room. Traeger's examination took less than a minute. When he was finished, there was heat smouldering back of the bleakness in his eyes. Modest John shifted his big, paunchy bulk, blocking the outer door.

"Not so fast, younker!" he growled. "You found somethin'. What was it?"

Traeger eyed him for a moment, then turned back to the body.

"That torn place on the left ankle and calf. What did that?" he asked.

"Stirrup," Harold answered. "Ed Mansfield and me figured it simple. Josh's saddle turned. His foot went through the left stirrup and he couldn't kick it free. His horse spooked and drug him to death."

"A stirrup could have made that tear," Traeger agreed tonelessly, "or a loop of rope. How could a man's foot go through a bell-toe stirrup? You tell me that!"

Modest John Harold swore suddenly and hooked a surprisingly strong hand in the muscles on top of Traeger's shoulder.

"Josh was a damned good friend of mine!" he said tightly. "What do you know. I've got a right to it, too!"

Traeger pulled away.

"Just what I've told you. Maybe there'll be more tomorrow. And maybe a bit more business for you."

He wheeled out the door, then, crossing to his horse. As he rode down toward the livery, he saw Harold standing in the doorway of his office, staring after him with a curious and measuring puzzlement.

* * *

At eight o'clock Hal Ferguson and the Cross Yoke riders had not yet put in an appearance. Hungry, Traeger was in the lunch-room off the lobby of the hotel, eating. Ed Mansfield found him there.

"Just come in from the Bent Moon, Traeger," the sheriff said as he dropped into a seat. "Ethel Spencer said I'd find you in town. She said you spent some time looking over Josh's horse and his saddle—"

Traeger shot a level look at the officer. "—and Modest John told you I'd had a look at Josh."

Mansfield nodded. "John didn't like the look in your eye. I don't like it, either, son. Reckoned I better talk to you. Seems as though you come to set quite a sight by Josh in the three months you worked for him. You ain't alone. John and me and his wife knowed Josh thirty years as against your three months. But we ain't making something out of nothing. We're hit and hit hard that Josh is gone. But we ain't jumping fences that ain't there. Josh was killed by accident. Let it go that way and cool yourself down!"

Bill Traeger leaned suddenly forward. "What kind of stirrups did Josh ride?" he asked sharply.

Mansfield blinked in surprise. "Why—plain hoops, I reckon, maybe *tapaderos* on 'em, like anybody else."

"They were bell-toes, Sheriff. And somebody has got to answer me some questions!"

Mansfield's surprise broadened. Over the sheriff's shoulder, beyond the front window of the hotel, Traeger glimpsed a stir on the street. There was a buckboard, accompanied by a number of milling riders, among whom was a tall man on a beautiful palomino.

Traeger discounted the buckboard, which he knew carried Robin Starr. And his discounted the man on the palomino, whom he knew was Drake Parker of the Broken T. He saw only that Hal Ferguson and his two mates from the hills were among the other riders.

He rose abruptly from the table, leaving a dollar on the cloth, and strode swiftly for the door.

He had intended leaving Mansfield flat—had, in fact, forgotten the man. But though the sheriff of Cascabel County might have been careless enough to overlook the kind of stirrups a dead man rode, he was capable of swift judgment and even more swift movement.

As Traeger reached the door of the café, the muzzle of a gun jammed into his back and Mansfield's voice, smooth and cautioning and flintily inflexible, sounded in his ear.

"Take the side door, son, and walk easy. Cut across the street to the dark side and right on to my office. Step false and I'll split your head with my gun-sight. You and me have got to have a talk afore I'll turn you loose on the street of my town again!"

Traeger stood motionless for a long moment, watching Ferguson and the others dismounting before Payson's place. They'd be waiting for him there. Confident, cocky, and thinking their offer of a job would clinch the last ragged end of the job they had done for their mistress.

He wanted to meet them. He wanted to pull the warp of the whole thing apart before their eyes. He wanted to square the wrong done the iron for which he worked. And the law—the gray-headed law which should be siding him tightly—was, instead, blocking his path.

There was an instant in which Traeger measured his chances of flipping the balance on the sheriff and getting free onto the street. But he weighed fragments of the legends which dotted Ed Mansfield's history in this town and he knew the risk was too great. In his own way, Mansfield was a competent man. And hard.

CHAPTER TWO

Lawman's Code

A SULTRY anger was burning in Traeger when he reached the sheriff's office. He thought about the vaunted friendship which was sup-

posed to have existed between Josh Spencer and Mansfield through the years. He thought of the tawdry sympathy the officer must have doled out to Ma Spencer earlier in the day. He thought of Mansfield's sister, staying tonight with Ma with mocking, cloying false comfort. He had no doubt, measuring Mansfield's actions and reactions since he had, himself, hit town, that the sheriff was at least in sympathy if not in league with those who had manufactured the accident by which Josh Spencer had died. And treachery to a responsibility was second only to treachery to a friend, in the scale by which Bill Traeger measured his fellow men.

Mansfield seemed to understand this bitter scorn and the anger behind it. He was cautious until he had his prisoner safely in his carefully shuttered office and disarmed. Then he sank easily back into his chair.

"Son, you've been a hunter," he said suddenly. "You know a man don't get a cougar by rampagin' right up to him and spittin' in his eye. You got to come quiet, and when you hit, its got to be good the first time. There ain't any more tries.

"Lawin' is a lot like that. Take you, for instance. Sizeable gent, good worker, up on your business, so the word goes. But only three months in these hills. I could have talked to you a week ago like I done to Josh. I wish I had, now. But then I couldn't tell but what you might be drawin' pay from both sides of the fence and only workin' for one. I kept quiet and Josh wouldn't take me serious. So he's dead!"

"You could have talked to me a week ago—about what?"

Mansfield drew a line in the dust of his desk-top with one finger. "About the same thing I brought you here to talk on, now! Traeger, who you figure killed Josh—say by draggin' him at a rope's end and then tryin' to make it look accidental?"

"I don't know," Traeger said levelly. "But if I had ten minutes with Hal Ferguson behind a locked door, I reckon I'd find out!"

The sheriff nodded. "All right. For argument, say Ferguson. That's the same as sayin' Cross Yoke and in turn that's the same as sayin' Robin Starr. Right?"

Traeger nodded. A man did not make a murderer of a girl. But neither could he alter facts. Mansfield's soft voice went on steadily.

"The why, then. Answer: To get Bent Moon land. Ethel Spencer'll have an offer for her parcel afore the week's out. Agree?"

Traeger tipped his head.

"Then it's a matter of pinning it on Ferguson, or maybe one of his hands, making it stick, and sweeping the Cross Yoke clean, including Robin Starr, as accessories. You figured good, son. You're quick and you see things. And by hell, I believe you'll keep on fightin' for Josh's iron long after he's gone. But you're wrong—wrong as hell!"

"About Ferguson?"

Traeger's voice was mockingly scornful. Mansfield's lips straightened into a tight line.

"I don't know about that—yet," he said slowly, "I never thought about them bell-toe stirrups of Josh's till you put me on 'em. No, I was meanin' Robin Starr. You've got that gal wrong!"

"She's marryin' one third of the hill land. She owns another. Why shouldn't she want to crowd Josh and Ma off the last one?"

"Robbie Starr ain't marryin' anybody—leastways, not Drake Palmer. I'm an old cuss, Traeger, but I still know when a gal hates a man's guts. Palmer's got a note on her spread. She'll put up a wildcat's fight to keep him from gettin' it. But she'll be damned afore she'll marry him. Which proves the gal's got sense!"

Traeger stood up, suddenly impatient. "Sheriff, I was on a job when you shoved a gun in my back. You can lock me behind your bars, but you can't keep me standing here while you talk yourself out. If the Starr girl isn't behind Josh's death, then somebody else is. And the law of this town ought to be tracking him, right now!"

Mansfield rose, too, grinning slightly. "You're a testy gent, Traeger!" he complained. "I didn't bring you down here to jaw you. I wanted to see you set straight on things. And I wanted to keep you from bracin' Ferguson and maybe dressin' Robbie Starr down in a way you'd regret later. I've got a badge on my vest, which you ain't. If there's bracin' to be done, I

can do it a sight safer than you. And I've got the legal right to make my bracin' stick, which you ain't. You sit tight here and cool your heels till I get back. I'll buy you a drink then."

Mansfield kicked open the door of the single cell and tipped his head toward it. Traeger eyed him uncertainly. Bill understood the old lawman's position now, but he didn't like the idea of bars. When Traeger finally shrugged and stepped through the gate, the sheriff banged it closed, turned the lock, and dropped the key into his pocket. Crossing to the door, Mansfield let himself out onto the dusty street.

Traeger paced the cell restlessly. In a way he knew he should be grateful to the old officer. Mansfield knew as well as Traeger himself did that if Hal Ferguson had engineered the accident which killed Josh Spencer, the Cross Yoke foreman was apt to bridle at questioning. There were plenty of Cross Yoke hands at Payson's by now. And Mansfield might be walking into something from which he'd be lucky to crawl.

But Traeger wasn't entirely satisfied. He didn't like Mansfield's insistence that Robbie Starr's skirts were clean. Bill regretted he didn't know the girl at least well enough to have a solid opinion of his own. Ferguson was only a foreman on her ranch.

It seemed unlikely the man would play a killer's game without her authority. And then there was Mansfield's positive statement of antagonism between the girl and young Palmer of the Broken T. If the girl wasn't marrying the Broken T, it was hard to see where the Cross Yoke would profit much by the addition of Josh's few acres. And without that profit, Traeger's hunch about the whole scheme behind Josh Spencer's death wasn't convincing, even to him.

Time passed slowly. Mansfield had been gone long enough to have twice over held a parley at Payson's. Traeger would have sensed trouble, except that the sounds of life in Cascabel drifted in his tiny window without a break in their formless rhythm. He waited with growing tension.

Suddenly the front door of the office swung open.

TRAEGER pressed impatiently against the bars of the cell gate. But the hand on the knob did not belong to Mansfield. And back of it was a tall girl in a slanting, flat-crowned Stetson and levis. The emptiness of the office seemed to startled her. She stepped on in after a pause, closing the door behind her. And finally her attention turned to Traeger.

This was Robbie Starr. Having never seen her except at a distance, recognition was swift and positive in Bill. And with the recognition came realization that Mansfield had been right in his assertion Robbie Starr had had no connection with Josh's death. This girl was like spring grass—like yucca in the wind at blossom-time, like the white water on a mountain stream. If she had a part in this, it was far from violence.

"Where's Sheriff Ed Mansfield?" she asked. Then her brow knit and she stepped closer. "You're the Bent Moon man—Traeger, arent you?"

Bill nodded dryly. "Mansfield's out and I'm in."

The girl looked at him curiously for a moment. He thought she was going to ask him why he stood on the wrong side of the gate. But she spoke of the sheriff instead.

"That's funny. I saw Ed in front of the Rattlesnake. I wanted to talk to him. He told me to meet him at the office in an hour. It's been more than that, now."

"He hasn't come back," Bill repeated. The girl turned toward the door.

"If he does, tell him I've got to see him before morning, before Ethel Spencer and his sister get to town!"

Traeger nodded.

"It's terribly important. Tell him to wait for me!"

Robin Starr left and Traeger fell to restless thinking of her urgency and Mansfield's delayed return, and of the significance of these things in the pattern of violence he had uncovered in a pair of bell-toed stirrups. His thinking went on until it was abruptly interrupted at the end of a quarter hour by the sudden banging open of the street door again.

Hal Ferguson came in, showing no apparent surprise at Mansfield's absence. He kicked the door shut behind him, but not before Traeger had a glimpse of one

or more shadowy figures on the walk outside.

"I've been looking all over hell for you, Traeger," the Cross Yoke foreman said shortly. "I made you an offer out on the grass this afternoon. Your iron is busted with old Josh dead. Your kind of hand won't ride for a granny like the old man's wife. You need a new bunk. Now, listen: You've got tight jaws. You've been around Cascable long enough for me to see that. And I'm hiring tight-jawed gents for the Cross Yoke. Rustler's pay—sixty and costs. What say?"

"*You're* hiring, Ferguson—or Miss Starr?"

Ferguson colored. "I've got work to do, Traeger. You've got one minute to take my offer. And that includes prying you out of this damned little tin tank!"

Traeger shook his head. "I like it here," he said.

Ferguson snarled. "You won't, compadre," he promised, "because you're going to have another prying, stubborn fool for company!"

The Cross Yoke foreman turned to the door, jerked it open, and called out onto the walk: "Bring him in here!"

The two Cross Yoke riders who had been with Ferguson in the hills slid through the door, lugging a blanket-draped figure between them. They dumped their burden on the floor and Ferguson jerked the blanket away. It was the body of a man, sprawled on his face. Traeger recognized Ed Mansfield before he saw the huge wound in the man's back.

Bill swore quietly. Ferguson ignored him. Bill's gun was on Mansfield's desk. Ferguson lifted it, wrapped the blanket around its muzzle to deaden the sound, and fired a shot into the corner of the floor.

Reaching in the dead sheriff's pocket, the Cross-Bow man found the cell key. He dropped this on the floor of the office with nice calculation, just out of Traeger's reach from the cell. Then he turned to his companions.

"Back to Payson's, now. The back way in. Drift and talk. I'll work up somebody into wanting to see Mansfield for something. They'll find this. There won't be anything this gent can say after that. And I'll buy you both a drink at his hanging. And I want one of you birds to turn out early in the morning. As soon as Spencer's old lady and Mansfield's sister hit town, I want to know. I've got to see 'em before our lady boss does. Savvy?"

One of the men grunted. Both of them filed out. Ferguson stopped in the door and grinned at Traeger.

"I told you there wasn't a man so damned tough he didn't need friends," he mocked. "You took the wrong fork on this trail, brother!" And he tossed the fired gun into a corner of the cell, and was gone, slamming the door.

Traeger stared at the limp, shrunken body of the dead sheriff, wondering just how much Ed Mansfield had known of what he faced when he started up the street toward Charlie Payson's Rattlesnake Saloon. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Wanted—A Killer!

TIME was a thing against which Traeger couldn't battle. It wouldn't take Ferguson long to trump up some excuse for a townsman to come down to Mansfield's office. And when the townsman came, Bill knew exactly where he'd be.

Ferguson had set the stage cleverly. The whole thing looked plain enough. Ed Mansfield had a prisoner behind bars, and Ed had been a little careless. His prisoner had gotten to a gun and driven a slug into the officer's back. A break of bad luck had made Mansfield fall in such a way that the prisoner couldn't reach his key, after all.

Tension mounted in Traeger until every sound from outside crawled along his nerves. But when the door opened for a third time since Mansfield had locked him up, it was without warning and no townsman slid through the opening. It was Robin Starr. She stepped around the dead sheriff, found the key, and turned the tumbler of the cell gate lock.

"Get out—fast!" the girl whispered. "Hal will be back in minutes. Get clear out of town—clear out of the county!"

Traeger shook his head. "Not till my business is finished!" he snapped.

"You can't bring Josh Spencer back to

life. Ethel won't stay on the Bent Moon. There's no place for you, and if you stay, your neck will stretch. Besides, there's other business than yours here. If you follow yours out, you'll ruin mine. I've let you out of this. You owe it to me to keep on moving!"

Bill caught the girl's arm.

"I wish I knew where you were in this!" he grated.

The girl started to shake her head.

"I know." Traeger interrupted harshly. "You won't tell me. But there's one thing I've got to know. Were you back of those two offers Ferguson made Josh before he died. Will you make an offer for the ranch to Ma, now?"

"You mean, do I want the Bent Moon?" Robin asked quietly. "The answer is yes. I want it worse than I've wanted anything in my life. I've *got* to have it!"

"Then you better lock me back up, Miss Starr!" Traeger growled. "Because I'm not leaving Cascabel County till I know why. I'm a Bent Moon man till I'm fired, and I'm making Bent Moon trouble mine!"

Outside, a rattle of feet on the walk coming down from the Rattlesnake sounded a sharp warning. Robin darted to the door, glanced outside, and spoke rapidly over her shoulder.

"You're a fool, Bill Traeger!" she charged. "I'm bucking one man, now. If I have to buck a whole townful of you, I will. Hal's coming down with half a dozen men. Stay, if you want to; run, if you're smart. But keep out of my way, or hoe your own row if you strike trouble!"

She slid through the opening into the night. Traeger heard her flatten along the front wall of the office, work to the far side, and after that there was silence as she vanished into the darkness beyond the jail.

He looked down once at Mansfield's body, slowly staining the floor of the little office, and he moved after the girl.

TRAEGER was in the weeds a hundred yards beyond the jail when Ferguson and the townsmen he had talked into looking for Mansfield on some pretext, reached the jail.

He saw Ferguson's bland satisfaction fade when the cell was reported empty. He heard the alarm spread and run through the town like a sheet of flame. He realized what his fate would have been had he been found locked in the cell with Ferguson's manufactured evidence. A swift victim of a town's outraged and savage anger, he would have been swinging high by dawn.

Taking advantage of the stir at the lower end of town about the little jail building, Traeger circled and quietly eased his horse out of the livery. He led the animal for a half mile, keeping to the shadows lying close to the ground. Then he rose to leather and made a pair of miles more, dismounting again in the shelter of a thick willow bosque.

Wanted as a killer on the loose, with every trail closed and every man he met an enemy, Traeger clung doggedly and with growing anger to the errand which had brought him down from the hills. To his original purpose of tracking down the coyote who had killed his boss was now added a grim determination to clean the slate for Ed Mansfield, and to hand due payment to the gent who had so nearly trapped Traeger, himself. Part of his errand was with Ferguson. He knew that. But how much of it he wasn't sure. And he had to know just how the man was involved in this before he moved.

There were a lot of loose threads in the crazy pattern of this trouble. The brain which had dreamed the thing up had cleverly clouded every issue. Traeger was aware of these dangling ends and they troubled him. Crouching down with a smoke, he set his mind into unhurried motion.

He had believed in the beginning that Robin Starr's greed for even a little more land to hold when she was married to Drake Palmer lay behind Josh Spencer's death. But both Josh and Mansfield had scouted this. After Robbie had been to the jail and subsequently freed him, Traeger's own judgment swung to vindication of that of the two dead men.

Other facts came, and he realized that no matter how much or for what reason Robbie might want the Bent Moon, she couldn't buy it. Not even if Ma, widowed, was forced to sell. Not when the Cross

Yoke plainly lacked enough cash to meet old Starr's note to Drake Palmer.

With the Cross Yoke too short of funds to be in the running, only Palmer was left. Ferguson, he was grimly certain, knew how both Josh Spencer and the sheriff had died. Which indicated the man was Cross Yoke's foreman only on the surface —that under cover he was actually Palmer's man.

There was further indication of Palmer's hand in the whole thing in the wide call Broken T had sent out for hands—in Ferguson's attempt to buy Traeger himself out of the way at rustler's pay. And there was Ma Spencer's insistence, backed by Mansfield, that Robbie Starr had no intention of marrying the Broken T. The whole thing made for bad blood and sudden death.

This much clear in his mind, Traeger rose and mounted again, drifting on up the hill road toward the first rises. Presently dawn ran thin fingers toward the zenith and pulled at the curtains of the night, turning them back in folds. An hour later a wagon wound down the road from the direction of the Bent Moon.

Three women were in the buckboard. A saddle horse trotted at the tail gate. Traeger waited while the dust spiralled on toward him.

He had expected Ma Spencer and Sue Mansfield. But not the third occupant, undoubtedly owner of the led horse. She was Robbie Starr. Ma didn't seem surprised when Traeger rode up and stopped the wagon. Scanning the tight faces of the two older women, Traeger realized Robbie had given them the story of the night's business in town. He was grateful.

He hadn't relished the prospect of telling Sue Mansfield about her brother's death.

"You got clear, Bill!" Ma said. There was relief in her voice.

Traeger nodded gravely. "I had to see you before you hit town. Somebody's going to look you up when you get there. He's going to offer you cash for your ranch. Maybe you think you'll have to take it. But you don't. There's been widows have run spreads before now and done a good job. The biggest offer you get in Cascabel will come from the man that had Josh clubbed down and dragged to death at the end of a rope!"

Ma didn't blink. "Widows with good foremen workin' for 'em have run spreads, you mean?" she said. "You're sticking, son. And I'm grateful. But anybody that offers me anything for the Bent Moon in town today is out of luck. I've already sold!"

Bill leaned forward sharply, unmindful of the sudden gouging of his saddle horn. "Sold!" he jerked out. "To who?"

"Drake Palmer," Ma said steadily. "He came out about midnight with six thousand dollars in cash. It's right here, in my reticule this minute."

Traeger sucked in a long breath. He was jolted that Ma would have so calmly taken Palmer's offer without seeing a shadow of the things behind it. And he had a vision of old Josh somewhere, outraged at Ma's simplicity. Then he caught a slight tilt of Robbie Starr's head. It might have been a caution.

And he suddenly realized that there was a slyness in Ma's eyes; a kind of satisfied calculation. Puzzled, he choked off the words he had framed. And a new plan shaped swiftly in his mind.

"You're a mite hasty, ma'am," he said dryly, "but it's done. I reckon you'll want me to take Palmer an inventory on the Bent Moon?"

Ma looked a little puzzled. "I've got to do that?"

Traeger grinned tightly. "A man's got as much right to know exactly what he's bought in a deal as the other party has to know how he bought it. Inventories are usual, ma'am."

Ma nodded slowly. "All right, Bill. I'll leave that to you. But you go careful. Don't you forget Bent Moon isn't ours any more!"

Bill's grin widened mirthlessly. "I won't forget!" he promised.

He tipped his hat to the three women and wheeled away. Robbie Starr's voice reached after him: "Bill—Bill Traeger! Wait for me!"

He turned. The girl was swinging up on the horse which had been trotting at the tail-gate. Hitting her seat, she thrust something into the off saddle-bag. Traeger had only a glimpse. But his brow knit. It was Ma Spencer's reticule.

CHAPTER FOUR

Powdersmoke Inventory

WHEN Robbie Starr came up abreast of him, Traeger reined off of the section road toward an arrowlike track which was a short-cut to town. They rode in silence for some time. Finally the girl spoke.

"I said you were a fool before. This proves it! Your boss dead, the iron you worked for sold out from under you, and still you head back for town! Cascabel thinks you killed the sheriff. It wouldn't take much talking for somebody to turn that stirrup proof you found into plain evidence that *you'd* killed Josh Spencer! You're going to get hung, Bill Traeger. And all for an inventory. Drake Palmer knows what he's bought with his six thousand dollars."

Traeger shook his head. "Not yet he doesn't!" he snapped.

Robbie Starr frowned. Suddenly she leaned close, catching Bill's arm. "Then I know what I'm going to buy with it!" she said tightly. "Freedom! Know what that means? No worry. No more listening to a man I hate talk of marriage. No more fighting to hold the piece of the hills I was born on. You stay away from Cascabel until I've seen Palmer!"

Traeger drew up, understanding cutting through him with clean suddeness.

That was it! That was why Ma had sold out! She hadn't wanted to keep the Bent Moon as badly as she'd wanted to see this girl win her fight. She'd taken Palmer's money and had calmly turned it over to Robbie, slyly letting the girl pay Palmer his note with his own cash.

It explained the satisfaction on Ma's face. And it wasn't a bad solution to Ma's problem. Cross Yoke was a good spread. Freed of the pressure Palmer had kept against her since her father's death, she could pay Ma back in installments big enough to keep Ma comfortably wherever she wanted to go.

Too, it broke the back of Palmer's now obvious play to end up with all three ranches in the hills. He would have the Bent Moon. But it was little, and the Cross Yoke would be permanently out of his reach. The woman had planned well and with a gameness Traeger admired. But they had made two mistakes.

The first was that Ferguson was still on Cross Yoke payroll. He would be a hard man for a woman to fire. And second was that the changing of money from one hand to another did not even old scores.

Traeger sensed Robbie's belief her plan was the only solution and her determination to carry it through ahead of anything else. He tightened the fold of the reins in his hands and unobtrusively set his feet more firmly in his stirrups.

"If you get to Drake Palmer ahead of me," he said flatly, "it'll be because you sit a better saddle than I do!"

His rowels bit into the big dun's hide. Outraged, the big horse lunged forward and in a stride flattened into an angry, driving run. Robbie Starr made no outcry, but flung her own mount recklessly forward. Traeger's dun was an ugly horse, but he could run. The brushy short-cut, broken with steep pitches and bad footing, was a savage thing to take at top speed. Robbie's lighter mount, superbly ridden, battled gamely. But the dun forged a lead of yards which grew until it had become a lead of minutes. And the big horse never broke the rhythm of that gaining stride.

With the girl behind him, Traeger's attention turned ahead. From the moment he hit the town, his movements would have to be finely calculated and swiftly paced. This was not only because of the girl, whose arrival would end any hope of the play he aimed to make. Cascabel itself would allow him only minutes before it recovered from the shock of his sudden appearance and realized a man wanted for murder was back on its street.

★

STARTLED faces jerked up along the street as Traeger rode its length with unbroken speed. Wheeling in to the rail fronting Charlie Payson's place, he peeled from saddle and collided roughly on the walk with a man who had just come out of the saloon.

The man was Modest John Harold. Surprise tugged at the coroner's face. Then, as Bill Traeger started to shove

past him, Modest John hooked Bill's arm.

"Don't go in there, younker!" he said swiftly. "There's a crowd—mostly from the Broken T!"

"Palmer—and Ferguson?" Bill rapped.

When Harold nodded, Traeger pulled his arm free. "Good!"

He hit the doors.

The street was bright. Payson's place was dark. Traeger anticipated this disadvantage. Ignoring the strong temptation to flatten himself just inside the door, putting his back against the solidness of a wall, he bored on into the room to the head of Payson's bar. The saloon owner, wooden-faced but with the alarm of recognition in his eyes, made a half-hearted gesture at moving forward as though for a customer's order. Traeger's bleak stare stopped him in his tracks.

Marking Payson's nearness to a place where he might have a counter gun racked, Traeger braced his body against the bar and turned toward the rest of the room. Modest John had been right. There was a sprinkling of townsmen, mostly familiar faces without names. Two or three of these wore guns. But Traeger ruled them out. There were none among them bold enough to try cutting down a wanted murderer.

It was the Broken T crowd at Payson's big poker table that he needed to watch. And for two reasons. Ferguson and Drake Palmer were among them. And the rest were the gunmen Palmer had hired from half a state, against the event of just such a showdown.

Traeger didn't count heads. There were roughly a dozen men at and about the table. Ferguson was screwed half around in an armchair on the near side of the table. Drake Palmer sat across from him.

Ferguson's face reflected uneasiness and a broad coloring of surprise. Traeger knew in this instant that Robbie Starr's turncoat foreman had not expected his reappearance in Cascabel, and that Ferguson was therefore at a momentary disadvantage.

Palmer was another matter. Traeger doubted if the expression on the face of the Broken T owner had changed at all with his entry. Palmer was smiling, cool, curious, and confident. Traeger's eyes fastened on the man's face.

"I hear you're new owner of my home iron, Palmer," he said tonelessly.

Palmer nodded.

Traeger moved toward the table, moving with long, loose strides. "You bought some trouble with the Bent Moon," he said.

Palmer looked up lazily. "How much?"

"I'll inventory it for you." Traeger answered. "And we'll start with this coyote!"

With lightning swiftness Traeger bent, wrapped his fist in the collar of Hal Ferguson's shirt, and jerked the man to his feet. Ferguson bleated and reached for his gun. Traeger stopped the draw with a knee driven mercilessly into the man's belly. He swung his own weapon free at the same time and made a raking pass with it, opening a wide gash in the Cross Yoke foreman's head.

"That's for Josh Spencer, bucko!" he ground out. "Now—start talking and start with the day you dragged Josh to death!"

Palmer sat motionless through this. His expression remained unchanged. Ferguson looked pleadingly at the man, got no answer, and spat a defiant oath at Traeger. Bill's weapon raked again and Ferguson whimpered. Palmer stretched his legs, then, stood up slowly.

"I don't know what's eating you, Traeger," he said quietly. "But I'm not going to watch you slice a man's brains out in front of me. If you've got a score with Hal, give him a man's chance!"

An approving murmur ran up from the tense, watching townsmen. Traeger sensed a shifting of balance among the Broken T men behind Palmer. He knew where he'd be if he turned up his gun, but he had no choice.

Palmer was forcing his hand. The fireworks would come now—before he had a chance to make Ferguson talk—unless he dropped his iron. Slowly, with obvious reluctance, he shoved the piece onto the table. Palmer reached forward, pushed it on across the felt, and grinned at Ferguson.

"All right, Hal. He's asked for it. Beat his damned head off!"

Ferguson's hand dropped to his belt again. The man twisted suddenly, tugging free. Traeger saw how this was to be. Ferguson was going to work on *him*, now,

and there'd be only one end to it. He swore. Then a booming voice rolled up the room from the rear door.

"Turn loose that gun, Ferguson, or you're a dead duck! And so's anybody else that chooses into this! Traeger, you've got a job. Do it—fast!"

Bill had a glimpse of a huge figure bulking in the doorway with a big rifle braced low across one hip. Modest John Harold—solid, grim, and belatedly bent on avenging his two old friends who had died in the last two days. Traeger had only that glimpse. Ferguson dropped his gun, looked at the Broken T pack for support, and leaped forward like a sprawling cat.

The Cross Yoke foreman was a wide and solid man, and he fought with the savagery of one born with the salt taste of blood in his mouth and a hunger for it. He slugged in close, feinted, and stabbed a crooked thumb full at Bill's eyes. Traeger saw it coming and jerked his head. Ferguson's slashing, broken thumbnail caught the skin at the corner of Bill's right eye and laid it back a pair of inches. Welling blood blinded him on that side.

Traeger went wild then, banking his play on the thin chance Modest John and his rifle could hold Palmer's crew in check long enough. A jolting swing knocked Ferguson full length on the floor. As the man sat up, Bill put the sole of a boot against his face and flattened him again.

Ferguson rolled. Traeger bent, lifted him to his feet, and buckled his knees with a hook to the side of his head. Loose-jointed, Ferguson staggered. Bill caught him, turned him, and drove an iron fist right into his belly high enough to crack ribs.

Ferguson turned green and sick. Traeger banged the hard flat of his open hand against the man's mouth, straightening him.

"Talk!" he snarled.

Ferguson's unfocused eyes rolled wildly until they found Palmer's face. "Drake—for the love of God—!" he begged.

Palmer rocked his gaze toward Modest John, braced in the doorway behind him, and made no answer. Traeger banged Ferguson again with his open palm. Blood fanned out in a fine spray from the man's battered face.

"Talk!"

Ferguson whimpered, then swore savagely at Palmer and straightened. Bill felt a grudging admiration. A killer for any man's hire, Ferguson still had the sand of a man in him.

"So I've got to take this and keep my mouth shut?" he screamed at the impassive Palmer. "Like hell, I do! Watch your gun, Drake! Harold said he'd tag the first man that made a move!"

In the doorway Modest John nodded tightly.

Ferguson twisted back toward Traeger. "Josh Spencer was roped from his saddle and dragged till he was dead. His saddle was dragged till it was scuffed and his horse hazed till it acted wild. You figured that, Traeger. Smart, eh? All right, I've said it now!"

"I figured that," he agreed quietly. "And I figured the rest of it. Keep on, Ferguson!"

"That's all—excepting that I had my orders—"

★

TRAEGER cut in on the man, watching Drake Palmer's slowly tightening frame out of the corner of his eye. He didn't want Ferguson to talk too fast. In spite of Modest John in the doorway, the coroner and himself couldn't hold this whole crew if they broke. And when Ferguson had said enough, they would break. Palmer's tightness told him that.

NO WESTERN FAN will want to miss John H. Latham's smashing owlhoot novel, "Good Badge-Toters Die Young!" which leads off the gala March issue of *New Western*. It's backed up by two long novelettes by Morgan Lewis and Ed Earl Repp—plus short stories by Pearsol, Floren, Overholser, and many others. Get your copy now!

"And Mansfield, bucko?" Bill prodded Ferguson again. "He went looking for you last night. He came back dead. You did that?"

Ferguson looked at Palmer and held back. Traeger's hand lashed across his face again. He sobbed with bitter helplessness. "Drake stopped Ed in the alley back of Payson's place, here. I got him while they were talking. He was guessing too much, like you—"

Another sob shook Ferguson. He took a sudden step backward and cried out wildly. "For the love of God, I'm diggin' my own grave! I killed him. Hell, yes! I killed Josh! I've said it. Ain't that enough?"

Traeger shook his head. "No!" he answered implacably. "Who gave you orders?"

Ferguson wheeled recklessly. Palmer's gun jerked up. Ferguson had not time to voice a word before Palmer's bullet struck him between the eyes. But the way he turned toward the Broken T owner was enough. Words could have been no plainer.

In the instant that Palmer's gun fired, Traeger not only saw the Broken T crew splitting at a nod from its boss, fanning out to catch both Modest John and himself, but a tightening among the townsmen under the impact of the blunt story they had just heard.

Traeger wished he knew these men and could tell how far they'd jump, but there wasn't time to watch. Palmer's weapon was swinging toward him. His own gun lay on the felt across the wide table. Ferguson's was a little closer. He dove for it as Palmer loosed his second shot.

The slug had only yards to go and couldn't miss. It furrowed Traeger's shoulder from blade to waist and he sprawled reaching across the table. Then his fingers locked around Ferguson's piece and he came up, tagging a Broken T man who was leveling on him as he came.

In the distance he heard the big rifle in Modest John's hands roar twice, and the coroner's bull-like voice bellowing a startled protest at some hurt which stung him. For a moment Bill thought the coroner was down. Then the rifle slammed again.

Another slug hit Bill. He couldn't tell where it came from in the press. He answered without conscious aim. Broken T was scattering. Gunsmoke hazed Payson's place. The barman was down behind his counter. In a shift of the press, Traeger saw one of the townsmen, a smoking gun in his hand, dive from one table to another as though circling the Broken T bunch. And the place was splintering under the hammer of guns.

Palmer suddenly raised up at the far end of the table across which Bill half sagged. Palmer had been hit. He moved with a wounded man's deliberation. He was a clear target, the kind of thing a fighting man sees in a dream of violence. His gun was rising with steady carefulness; Palmer was going to tally this shot. Traeger's eyes focused, waiting for the sight of his own weapon to come up into line on the beckoning mark of Palmer's face.

But Traeger's gun had suddenly become terribly weighted. Sweat dampened him at the effort of raising it, and it wouldn't lie steady. Palmer's face swam into a haze and refused to come out. Back of the haze somewhere, Palmer's gun fired. A giant hand banged at the table beside Traeger's ear and a ragged spray of splinters gouged his cheek. Almost at the same time, his own piece exploded as though of its own accord.

Palmer came out of the haze, then. He came out of it standing at his full height. A startled look was carved across his thin features. He took a backward step, then a limpness ran into his body. When his knees went, he fell heavily. . . .

★

THE RATTLER was suddenly quiet. Traeger was aware that the remnants of the Broken T had fled out the door and that other figures had come in. He heard Modest John Harold bellowing expansively at the townsmen who had joined in the tangle.

"Damned if it ain't a note when a gent in my line has to drum up his own business!" Modest John complained.

Bending above Palmer's body, the coroner coolly rifled the dead man's pockets. Traeger saw there was a roll of bills, some keys, and the like which Harold replaced.

But there was something which he kept. The coroner looked up blandly.

"Official duty," he explained shortly. "Here—run along and get Doc Peters. Traeger's a bit tore up and maybe there's one-two others worth patchin' enough for the county to feed for a spell!"

The townsmen wheeled out. Among the other figures which had plowed into the saloon when the Broken T fled was a woman. Breathless still from a reckless ride, she stopped beside Bill and dropped to her knees.

"I wanted to pay Drake myself," Robbie Starr said softly. "I wanted to see his face when he knew he couldn't touch me any longer. You robbed me of that, Bill. And I'm glad. He'd have tricked me again. Paper money wasn't the hard coin he deserved. Thank you, Bill. . . ."

Modest John squatted down beside her, his two huge hands cupped together. He opened them. They were filled with torn scraps of paper. Traeger knew then, what Modest John had taken from Palmer's pockets.

The relief which crossed her face when she recognized the fragments of her father's note was warming to see. Traeger understood what the Cross Yoke meant to her and he felt a stab of jealousy. Robbie turned toward him, but Modest John interrupted hurriedly.

"You've got your place clean again, Robbie," he said gruffly. "You get out there and leave us be. Don't come crying that you haven't got a foreman for your place. You're out of luck. As soon's I can get 'em together there's going to be a county council meeting. We're going to get us a new sheriff before you or anybody else gets to him!"

Robbie ignored the big man. She leaned a little more over Bill. She said nothing. But Bill needed only one look. He grinned wickedly at the coroner.

"You're too late, John," he said quietly. "Ma Spencer'll have the Bent Moon back, now. And she'll need me."

Modest John said. "Ma Spencer, hell!"

Traeger looked at Robbie Starr and let the contradiction stand.

THE END

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★ THE FIRE-WATER

His upraised hand held a knife, poised to strike. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Death Waits in Small Fork

A THROWN knife in the dark is not a thing recommended to bring about a tranquil night's sleep. Particularly when that knife is thrown at you.

Yet it happened so quickly that Dave Lawrence, peacefully inclined young Indian agent, did not have time to know fear. He had just stepped out of his office into the street's gathering dusk, pausing momentarily to light a cigar, when he sensed a sudden slither of movement across the way, heard a solid *thuck* against the log wall nearby. He froze, so completely surprised that he stupidly held the flickering match until it burned his fingers. A shadowy form moved, then running steps drifted off into the darkness.

"Damn!" he muttered, and threw down the match. There was nervous moisture

REBELLION ★ ★ ★

in the palms of his hands now as he groped along the face of the rough wall. The moisture congealed as he touched the cold, smooth steel of the knife, sunk deep in the wood not six inches from where his throat had been.

Inside the office, he bolted the door, closed the shutters and lit a lamp. As the

It was young Dave Lawrence's dangerous job, as Indian agent, to keep Uncle Sam's charges from that mysterious flood of fire-water, which had already started to loose wholesale murder in that remote strip of savage wilderness. . . .

Thrilling Novel of the Lawless Strip

By Bill Gulick

orange glow brightened, he held the knife close to the lamp and examined it.

It was a knife made for throwing. Not the heavy, wide bladed kind the Cherokees in the district used for every purpose from skinning bears to trimming toe-nails, but a slim, long bladed, well balanced weapon. The handle was plated with silver, so soft that a fingernail scratch marred its surface. Mexican, Dave mused. He wondered what a Mexican was doing here in Small Fork. More to the point, why should a Mexican use him for a target?

With a shrug, he opened a desk drawer and dropped the knife into it; from another drawer, he took out a wide, cartridge-studded belt and buckled it around his waist. He drew the single-action Colt from its holster, spun the cylinder tenatively, and then replaced the gun, congratulating himself on his foresight in keeping it loaded and oiled despite the fact that he had not used it for two years.

He stooped over and blew out the lamp. "Fashion note," he murmured as he crossed the darkened room. "This season the well dressed man in Small Fork will wear a shirt, a pair of pants—and a well-oiled sixgun!"

But he was not smiling as he eased open the door and walked downstreet toward the Crossroads Hotel.

★

THERE was a saying in Small Fork that at Dyke Scott's Crossroads you could buy anything from a live bear cub to a crooked politician. The saying was not without factual basis, for Dyke Scott was a shrewd business man. He had trapped and traded in the Territory for twenty of his thirty-seven years of life, and knew the wilderness as a small boy knows his favorite swimming hole. From a one-room store, he had built the Crossroads into a prosperous combination hotel, restaurant, general merchandise store and trading post. It was headquarters for most of the business transacted in the Territory.

Dave Lawrence sighed as he polished off the last bite of tender venison steak and pushed away his plate. Dyke Scott's cooks, imported all the way from New Orleans, knew their business.

As he was picking up the check, somebody touched him on the shoulder and a drawling voice said, "Dave, I'd like a palaver with you."

He turned. A thin faced, bronzed man wearing the badge of a deputy United States marshal stood nearby. "Sure, Harvey," Dave said. "Here or private?"

"I ain't anxious for too many ears to be listenin'."

Dave paid the check, then he and the deputy, Harvey Cook, found a quiet spot in one corner of the hotel lobby. He gave Cook a cigar, watching the yellow shadows dance across the officer's face as he applied a match.

Cook leaned forward in the leather chair. "I'm takin' Red Burgess to Fort Smith tonight."

"Did he talk?"

"Not a squeak. But he will. I got enough evidence to send him to the pen for ten years. He'll sing high an' sweet when he sees those iron bars."

Dave didn't envy Cook's job. It was a two-day horseback trip to Fort Smith over lonely mountain trails.

"I hope you're right," he said. "There's no time to waste."

Cook looked up from his cigar. "Cherokees givin' trouble?"

"Only among themselves, so far. Fights, petty thievery. I've promised Running Bear to stop the liquor traffic. If I don't, things will get out of hand."

"I still think we ought to arrest Jack Howell."

Dave shrugged. "For what? This is open range. You can't hold a man just because you find whiskey hidden on his land. Anybody could have used that canyon for a hideout."

"Adam Woodstock, for instance?"

"Maybe. But personally, I think the old coot is harmless."

The deputy stood up, laughing without mirth. "That's the trouble with you, Dave. The Territory's full of snakes—an' you think they're all harmless. They ain't, take my word for it. Some mornin' you're goin' to wake up snake-bit—by a rattler." He thrust out his hand. "Take care of yourself. I'll let you know if Burgess tells us anything . . . An' think of me when you eat this Italian's grub. Best I ever tackled."

Dave shook hands with the officer, then let himself slowly back down into the chair, scowling. He wondered about Howell and Woodstock.

Jack Howell was a rancher, a thin, taciturn Texan of middle age. Two years ago he had come to Small Fork and leased five thousand acres of fertile valley grassland from the Cherokees. He seemed to be prosperous—certainly too prosperous to attempt the risky business of smuggling whiskey to the Indians.

Adam Woodstock, then? He was a queer one. He lived alone in a shack far back in the wilderness of the Kiamichi Mountains with no companions but his dogs and his fiddle. He fished a little and trapped a little, but mostly he seemed to spend his time sitting in front of his cabin playing the fiddle and talking to his dogs. The Cherokees stayed clear of him, claiming he was a shade off. Was he? Dave wondered. Or was he playing a deeper game?

And the knife which had been thrown at him tonight—did the higher-ups in the game suspect that Burgess had revealed their identity to him? And what was a Mexican doing here?

Dave frowned impatiently and got up, stretched himself like a healthy young mountain lion and left the hotel. All this conjecturing made him sleepy. But he wasn't too sleepy to forget to hitch the gun around to a handier position on his hip as he walked down the dark, quiet street toward his room.

★

MEETING the weekly train from Kansas City was a fixed habit with Dave Lawrence, for he had learned that by noting who arrived and departed a man could get a good idea of what was afoot in the district. Today, he was particularly interested in seeing whether an unknown Mexican would put in an appearance.

The noon sun poured mercilessly down on the platform and there was not the slighest whisper of breeze to dissipate its heat. Dave, standing in the scant shade on the north side of the station, clawed at his collar and inwardly cursed the Indian Bureau regulations which forced him to act like a gentleman. The train was late, as usual. He rolled a cigarette, his restless eyes wandering across the crowd.

Len Hargis, the agent, was hurrying busily about, basking in the importance which was his for this one day. Antonio Bonzelli, head chef at the Crossroads, stood near a baggage truck, sweating profusely. His presence here, Dave knew, meant that some rare delicacy in the food line was expected in on the train. Bonzelli always took personal charge of such items, exorting them from train to hotel as if they were gold. Dave wondered what he expected today. Watermelon? Or the even rarer treat of ice?

Bonzelli kept staring to the north, from time to time looking at his gold pocket watch. Dyke Scott came up, said something to him, and Bonzelli answered with a wide, exasperated shrug. Scott laughed, then noticed Dave standing near the station and came over to him.

"Hot, ain't it?" he said, taking off his hat and mopping his forehead.

Dave nodded and dropped the cigarette, working it into the ground with a heel. Scott said, "Hear about the fight at the hotel last night?"

Dave frowned. "Who?"

"Couple of Cherokees. They'd have killed each other if the Indian police hadn't stepped in."

"Drunk?"

"Like lords."

"Where'd they get the whiskey?"

Scott shrugged. "That's what I'm asking you. I'm gettin' tired of them wrecking my place. Someday I'll lose my temper and shot one of 'em."

"That wouldn't be very smart, Dyke."

"Then keep 'em away from the Crossroads when they're drunk."

So, Dave thought as he watched Scott walk away, it was as he had expected. Arresting Burgess hadn't stopped the liquor traffic. There was somebody higher up, somebody big. His eyes were somber as they continued their survey of the crowd.

He noted that the rancher, Jack Howell, was here today. Howell didn't seem too pleased with life just at the moment His face was more taciturn than ever and he paced the platform with quick, angry steps.

Texas, Dave reflected bleakly, was right

next door to Mexico. He wondered if Howell knew how to throw a knife.

The train was rounding the bend to the north now. The engine, a tiny wood-fired affair with a brass bell and high, belled smokestack, trundled slowly past and came to a stop with a triumphant hiss, as if congratulating itself on having once again made a successful trip into the wilderness.

The train was made up of a dozen freight cars and a combination passenger-baggage coach. Dave narrowly watched the passengers alight. A couple of returning trappers, bleary-eyed from a week's celebration in Kansas City, pushed their way hurriedly through the crowd, as if anxious to get back to the solitude of the mountains. Several drummers, florid faced, fleshy men wearing the usual checked suits of their trade, struggled with bulky sample cases. They called peremptorily to a couple of Negro flunkeys from the Crossroads Hotel, who came forward and carried the cases to the waiting dray.

The last passenger to alight was a woman. She was young, Dave could see, and pretty. She and her fine clothes looked out of place on the dusty platform.

Her eyes searched the crowd uncertainly. A man was pushing his way through toward her, and she saw him now and waved, smiling. When he reached her, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Dave scowled. The man was Jack Howell. He didn't seem glad to see the girl, for he pushed her away, has face registering displeasure. Talk about casting pearls before swine! Dave mused. Now if it was me she threw her arms around—!

Howell started talking rapidly to the girl, emphasizing his words with angry gestures, but the girl kept shaking her head, smiling. At last she managed to silence him long enough to hand him a letter.

The rancher stared at it, apparently confounded. Then he shrugged helplessly, turned, and gestured at Dave.

Dave frowned as they came toward him. He wondered if he had been chosen to mediate the argument. The girl looked even nicer at close range. She had bright blue eyes which just matched her dress. Her hair was golden, shimmering now in the sunlight. Dave took off his hat.

"Lawrence," Howell grunted, "this is my niece, Joan Neal. She's goin' to work for you."

Dave stared at the girl. "Work?" he mumbled. "For me?"

Joan Neal laughed. "I'm a school teacher. The Indian Bureau sent me."

"But there isn't any school."

"You're to help me start one. I've got letters from the Bureau explaining everything."

Dave raged inwardly. "That's fine," he muttered inanely. "That's just fine."

"It's the damndest thing I ever heard of!" Howell snorted. "If I had my way, she'd git right back on that train."

"I think you ought to take your uncle's advice, Miss Neal," Dave said.

"When you two are through trying to scare me," the girl answered quietly, "you can take care of my luggage."

Howell muttered something about the contrariness of women. Dave kept discreetly silent. Joan Neal smiled and said, "You put my things in the wagon, Uncle Jack. Pick me up at Mr. Lawrence's office in half an hour. He and I have some things to talk over."

Howell moved away, still grumbling, and Dave walked down the street with the girl. He was acutely conscious of her presence beside him and of the masculine eyes which followed them both. There were few white women in Small Fork, and none of them was young. Dave cursed the ignorance of the Bureau for sending a girl into a spot like this.

At the office, she gave him the letters from the Indian Bureau. They instructed him to give her all the assistance possible in finding a suitable building for a schoolhouse, furnishing it, and rounding up the young Cherokee children.

"Is there any kind of building available?" she asked.

He nodded, scowling. "There's an empty barn out at the edge of town. Used to be a church."

"'Used to be'?"

"Preacher died a couple of years ago. Smallpox. Nobody's come along since who was darn fool enough to take over the place."

She looked at him icily. "You pay such nice compliments, Mr. Lawrence."

"This isn't Boston," he snapped. "There's Indian trouble brewing. If it comes to a head, you'll wish you'd never seen this place."

"I'll be the best judge of that," she answered quietly.

She was seated in the only chair in the room, facing the door. Suddenly her eyes widened and the color drained from her face. Dave turned quickly.

A massive Cherokee brave, dressed in faded denims, stood just inside the threshold. His black, glittering eyes were fixed on the girl. "Well, Spotted Horse," Dave said, "what do you want?"

The Indian came forward a step, thrust out his hand, palm up, and grunted. Money. Want money."

"What for?"

"Want money," Spotted Horse repeated sullenly.

Dave's eyes narrowed. Spotted Horse was drunk. Payment day is a week off," he said patiently. "Do you want the money to buy whiskey?"

A gleam of childlike craftiness came into the brave's eyes. He shook his head. "Me hungry. Children hungry. Squaw hungry. No buy whiskey."

Dave studied him silently for a moment, then gestured at the door. "If you're hungry, go to your chief. I'll give you no money to buy whiskey."

The brave stared at him sullenly, then turned and left. Dave smiled grimly at Joan. "How would you like to teach geography to a class with thirty like him in it?"

"The children won't be like that," she said stubbornly.

"Don't bet on it. The Cherokees have peculiar ideas about the kind of education their children need. The fond papas might take a notion to come to school, too, just to see what you're teaching their kids."

The girl stood up. "If you're trying to frighten me, you're wasting your time. Suppose we get down to business."

Dave shrugged, and started thumbing through some papers in a desk drawer. A stubborn young lady, he mused.

He was straightening up when Joan suddenly screamed, *"Look out!"*

He whirled to face the door. Spotted Horse had come back, and was lunging across the room, a murderous gleam in his dark eyes, and his upraised right hand held a glittering knife, poised to strike.

CHAPTER TWO

Trail to Nowhere

DAVE had no time to draw his gun. He managed to catch the Indian's right wrist in his left hand, but the brute force of the charge drove him back hard against the desk. Spotted Horse reached for his throat with his other hand. Dave caught that wrist, too, then they stood poised for desperate seconds, muscles straining in silent, bitter contest.

Dave knew he was no physical match for the giant Cherokee. He felt himself being bent inexorably backward. The hand which gripped Spotted Horse's knife arm grew numb. Faintly, he heard Joan scream, but he knew that help could not possibly come in time.

He had but one desperate chance. Abruptly, he let his body relax and fall back on the desk. At the same instant, he switched both hands to the wrist which held the knife, twisted hard, and brought his right knee sharply up into the pit of the Indian's stomach.

Spotted Horse's breath whistled out in a shocked grunt. The knife clattered to the floor. Spotted Horse stumbled backward a step, striving to catch his breath, and Dave planted both feet on the Cherokee's chest, kicked out savagely. The Indian flew across the room, brought up hard against the solid log wall. He crumpled like a sodden gunny-sack.

Heavy silence hung in the room now, broken only by Dave's harsh, labored breathing. He straightened up, wincing as pain shot through the strained muscles in the small of his back. He looked at Joan Neal. Her eyes were wide.

"You—you've killed him!" she gasped.

Dave gave a careless glance to the Indian and shook his head. "No. Maybe I should have, though." He drew his gun and said harshly, "Get up, Spotted Horse. I'll give you just two minutes to leave town."

Spotted Horse stirred, got slowly to his feet. The shock had dissipated the whiskey-madness, and he looked now like a chastened, very sick Indian. In the doorway, he paused, glaring with surly hatred at Dave. Dave holstered the gun.

"I don't want to see you around town again for a week," he warned. "If I do, I'll turn you over to the Indian police."

For the first time, fear came into Spotted Horse's face. "Me no come back," he mumbled, then left precipitately.

Dave wiped the nervous moisture from his forehead, noting as he did so that his hand was trembling. That had been close. He looked grimly at Joan. "Well," he said, "how do you like our peaceful community?"

"Surely they aren't all like that!"

"Only when they're drunk. But that's been pretty often, lately."

"He seemed frightened when you mentioned the Indian police. What would they do with him?"

Dave started gathering up the papers which had scattered over the floor. Over his shoulder he said carelessly, "Whip him. They'd strip him to the waist, tie him to a tree and give him fifty lashes with a leather whip with metal burs in it."

She gasped. "They might kill him!"

Dave stood up. "Yeah. And he might have killed me."

The girl was visibly shaken, but Dave said nothing to ease her fears. The Territory was no place for a person with a weak stomach, and the sooner she became accustomed to its ways—or frightened into leaving it—the better.

Jack Howell came in and said that the wagon was waiting. Joan, still white-faced and silent, went with him to the door, then paused. She looked at Dave for a long moment without speaking.

"You've still got time to catch that train back to Kansas City," Dave said.

She shook her head. "I wasn't thinking about that. I was wondering if you could get the schoolhouse ready so that I could start classes in a couple of days, at most."

Dave nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said, and his voice had a kindlier tone now. "I'll have everything ready."

He sat down on the edge of the desk after they had gone and fashioned a cigarette. You're a damn fool, Dave Lawrence, he told himself. You've got a lap full of trouble already and here you are begging for more.

He held a match to the cigarette, inhaled long and deep. A ray of sunlight crept in the narrow west window, and, slanting down like a golden arrow through the dusty air, touched a bright, glittering object. Dave scowled, and picked up the knife which he had wrested from Spotted Horse's hand.

It was not a Cherokee knife. It was long and slim, and the handle was plated with a dull, soft silver.

"I'll be damned!" he muttered.

The knife was a dead mate for the one which had been thrown at him in the darkness the night before!

★

DAVE LAWRENCE came out of the restaurant at the Crossroads and paused on the veranda to roll a cigarette. An early morning hush lay along the street now, but already the rising sun was driving away the night chill. Dave lit a match on his thumb-nail, held it to the cigarette then walked leisurely upstreet toward his office.

Two young Cherokee children, black-eyed and serious faced, passed him, riding double on a fat, docile mare. Dave smiled. The new school had caught on with the Indians better than he had expected. At first the Cherokees were suspicious; then curiosity overcame their suspicion, until now, at the end of a week, they attended school each morning as matter-of-factly as any other children.

Dave had been too busy to puzzle much over the twin knives. They were tied in, he felt, with the whiskey-smuggling, but in just what way he hadn't yet been able to figure out.

He couldn't believe that Spotted Horse had been the man who threw the knife at him in the darkness. Indians didn't kill that way. Nor could he believe that Spotted Horse's attack in the office was premeditated. Could someone, he wondered, had given the drunk Cherokee the Mexican knife, hoping that he would

either kill Dave, or that he would be suspected of the knife-throwing? If so, who was it?

Dave shook his head angrily and wished that he could force the fight into the open so that he could see what he was up against. Maybe, he mused, he would soon hear something from the U. S. deputy, Cook, that would shed more light on the subject. Adam Woodstock was waiting for him in the office. He was a stooped, wiry man whose age was difficult to estimate because of the long, unkempt beard which covered his face. He sat in the chair behind the desk, his pale blue eyes regarding Dave blandly. Beside him crouched his two huge, surly dogs.

"Morning," Dave said. "What brings you to town so early?"

Woodstock looked furtively around the room, as if making sure of not being overheard, then said in a hoarse whisper, "Got sumthin' t' show ye."

"What is it?"

"It's out there—" Woodstock made a vague gesture with a hand. "Out by Old Baldy."

Dave scowled. Old Baldy Peak was deep in the Kiamichis to the east. He started to question Woodstock further, then brought up short, thinking: Humor the old coot; this is a good chance to find out just how crazy he really is.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll get a horse."

He rented a rangy sorrel at the livery stable, then came back to the office and set out toward the mountains with the trapper. Woodstock was afoot, as always, but he moved along at such a rapid pace that the sorrel had to jog-trot to keep up.

A mile out of town, the wagon road swung off to the north. Woodstock continued to bear due east. The country ahead rolled sharply upward to the Kiamichis, whose slopes here were covered with thick stands of blackjack and southern pine. The old game trail which they followed wound tortuously, seeking the easier slopes, but the trapper's pace did not slacken. Dave gained a new respect for the wiry man's vitality.

The wilderness was all around them now, vast, silent. Dave felt a moment of uneasiness. If Woodstock was not crazy, then he might be leading him into some kind of a trap. Dave's jaw tightened and he moved his right hand closer to the gun on his hip.

It was almost noon when they reached Old Baldy Peak. Through an opening in the blackjacks Dave could see the barren knob looming above, forbidding and desolate under the harsh light of the sun. Where the trail swung to the left below the peak and dipped into a tree-surrounded clearing, Woodstock halted.

Turning, he looked at Dave and gestured toward the hollow. "Down there," he whispered in a hoarse, cracked tone.

Something in his voice made the nerves along Dave's backbone tingle. He laid a hand on the gun-butt and, keeping a wary eye on the trapper, spurred the sorrel forward.

The hollow was perhaps fifty feet in diameter and devoid of vegetation. Evidences of a recent camp were here—a burned-out fire, an overturned skillet, a torn blanket—but these Dave hardly noticed.

Then his glance caught and froze on the two dead men.

They lay side by side, scarcely a foot apart, their faces pillowed on the ground. With a deep-throated curse, he dismounted and knelt beside them. He didn't need to turn them over to learn who they were; he had known that the moment he rode into the clearing.

One was the small-time whiskey peddler, Red Burgess; the other was the deputy, Harvey Cook. Burgess would never talk now, he thought grimly.

Suddenly there was a slight movement in the forest behind him and he remembered Woodstock. Whirling, he drew his gun and shouted hoarsely, "Woodstock!"

The only answer was the sharp report of a dry branch breaking under a hurrying foot. Dave stumbled across the clearing back to the spot where he had left the trapper. He was gone. From the south came faint sounds of a body crashing rapidly through the undergrowth.

Helpless rage overwhelmed Dave. He'd been made a fool of. He lifted the gun, fired blindly in the general direction of the sounds until the weapon was empty. When quiet once more descended, he stood for a moment listening. There was

no sound now but the gentle rustling of tree-tops in the wind and the faraway warbling of a lone mockingbird.

No use to follow Woodstock, he thought. It would be child's play for the trapper to shake him. He reloaded the gun and went back to the hollow, his mind grappling with the problem.

Studying the clear sign there, he had no trouble reconstructing what had happened. Cook and his prisoner had camped here the first night out from Small Fork. Someone had followed them, watched them as they slept, then ambushed them when they arose at dawn to prepare breakfast.

The handcuffs were still on Burgess' wrists.

He had been shot first, a single slug entering the back of his head. Cook had been shot twice, once in the back, then as he turned to face the killer; a second slug just above the heart had finished him.

He lay with one arm outflung as if pointing, facing a dogwood thicket. Dave went into the thicket and found where the killer had waited. Three empty .44 Winchester shells glittered on the ground. He picked them up, put them in his pocket.

His eyes burned savagely as he lifted the two dead men and tied them across the sorrel's saddle. Someone would pay for this.

As he paused for a last look around he noticed something strange on the ground where Cook had been lying. Kneeling, he traced the dark stains. There was a pattern to them, wavering and uncertain, but still, a pattern. They seemed to be letters—a "w" and an "o" and a third which he could not make out.

He frowned. Had Cook tried to write a message before he died? He had undoubtedly seen the killer's face. Had he been trying to write his name?

W, O. Suddenly it came to Dave. Woodstock!

Rising, he took the sorrel's reins and left the clearing, leading the horse down the winding forest trail with long, purposeful strides. After he'd taken the bodies back to town he'd find Woodstock and settle with him if it was the last thing he ever did.

IT WAS long after dark when he reached Small Fork. Leaving the bodies with Len Hargis, who acted as town undertaker when he wasn't occupied with his duties as station agent, he rode wearily to the Crossroads. He hadn't eaten since morning and hunger gnawed insistently now.

He ordered Bonzelli's specialty—a whole chicken fried in a thick, tasty sauce—and when it was served, pitched into it ravenously. His mind kept circling back to the strange way Woodstock had acted. Why had the trapper taken him to Old Baldy? Woodstock would feel perfectly safe from detection, of course, for both of his victims were dead; still, it was a peculiar way for a killer to act—even a crazy one. Or *was* the trapper crazy?

Dave scowled down at the chicken. It tasted flat and dry. Suddenly he pushed it aside and got up, no longer hungry. No food would taste right, he knew, until he had settled with Woodstock.

As he was crossing the hotel lobby Joan Neal came hurrying toward him. She was dressed in a pair of waist overalls and an old flannel shirt—evidently her uncle's—and her eyes were bright with excitement and fear.

"Dave!" she called as soon as she saw him. "You've got to come quick!"

He stiffened. "What's the trouble?"

"A bunch of Indians are raiding the ranch. They're mad drunk. They set fire to the haystack and are shooting the cattle. They're trying to get in the barn—they've got Uncle Jack cornered there."

CHAPTER THREE

Death Plays No Favorites

THE girl said, "He's all alone; the hands are with the cattle. They managed to get most of the herd into a blind canyon and are holding off the Indians there. They'll be able to take care of themselves, but I'm afraid for Uncle Jack."

Dave made a quick survey of the lobby. It was empty save for a few drummers, and these, he knew, would be worthless in a fight. Suddenly Dyke Scott, the hotelman and trader, accompanied by a couple of traders who worked for him,

came into the hotel. He took one glance at Joan's worried face, then came over and said, "What's the trouble here?"

Dave quickly explained the situation to him. "You showed up just in time," he concluded. "Get all the men you can and come with me."

Scott frowned. "What do you expect us to do—fight off the whole tribe?"

"It's not the whole tribe," Dave answered. "Just a small bunch of drunks and no-goods."

"They're Indians, just the same. I've got no quarrel with them. You can bet they've got a good reason for jumping Howell."

Dave knew there had never been any love lost between Scott and Howell, but he had supposed that it was due only to the natural animosity between trader and rancher. He wondered now if there was something more.

He searched Scott's face narrowly and snapped, "Just what do you know about this whiskey-peddling business? Are you trying to tell me Howell is mixed up in it?"

Scott shrugged. "I ain't trying to tell you anything. I'm just saying that any trouble Howell is in he's brought on himself." He jerked his head at the men with him. "C'mon, boys."

Dave stood for an instant staring at Scott's broad back as the man walked away, then he turned to Joan and said grimly, "We'll have to do what we can alone. Maybe I can talk reason to them."

"Anything you say. But please hurry!"

Riding at a full run along the rough wagon trail through the darkness didn't permit of much conversation, but Dave managed to get enough shouted bits of information out of the girl to piece together what had happened. A band of twenty Cherokees, half drunk already and led by the surly Spotted Horse, had ridden up to the ranch house shortly after dark. They had made demands on Howell—just what kind, the girl wasn't sure—and the crusty Texan had threatened them with a gun and told them to be on their way.

They had gone, only to return in half an hour, one bunch attacking the cattle and the other the barn. Dave wondered what they were after. He knew that Howell had no use for Indians, holding the typical Texan's belief that the only good redskin was a dead one, but up until now he had minded his own business and they had minded theirs.

Beside him, Joan shouted, "Look!"

Ahead, a blazing haystack illuminated the countryside like a huge torch. Against its glow black figures showed, galloping in erratic circles around the dark bulk of the barn. Dave could hear the wild, drunken shouts now. He saw the flash of rifles from circling Indians, then a answering flash from the barn.

"He's still there!" he yelled to the girl. "Maybe we're not too late!" He motioned her to a halt and reined up. She turned and looked at him questioningly. "You stay here," he ordered. "I'm going up and talk to them."

She nodded silently, but her fear was in her eyes, making him feel a warm tingle of something more than excitement. A man could be braver than he really was when he knew someone was apprehensive about his safety.

Slowly he rode toward the burning haystack, his hands resting on the reins away from his gun. He was staking everything on the fact that he had always treated the Cherokees fairly—his life now depended on whether or not they remembered that.

An Indian saw him, gave a guttural shout of warning. Dave felt the blood beat hard in his temples, but he kept mov-

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ing forward. He knew he wouldn't have a chance if they decided to shoot him down.

Within the circle of light he halted and sat rigid, waiting. A dozen savages had gathered around him now, staring at him sullenly. He looked from one harsh face to another until at last he found Spotted Horse. His eyes stopped there.

"What do you and your brothers want?" he asked.

Dave knew that Spotted Horse was a coward at heart, but the savage was drunk now and he spoke with the courage of his alcohol. "Whiskey," he grunted brazenly. "We want whiskey."

"You can't get it here."

Spotted Horse gave a grunt, as if contemptuous of Dave's knowledge. "Plenty whiskey here."

Dave was silent for the space of several long breaths. There was the sound of truth in the Indian's words; he was too drunk to lie. Dave swung out of the saddle and snapped, "You're lying, Spotted Horse."

The Indian shook his head and sullenly repeated, "Plenty whiskey here. Me know."

Dave frowned. Turning away, he strode toward the barn, halting a few paces away. "Come on out, Howell," he called.

There was a suspicious silence for a time, then a door opened cautiously and Howell, carrying his rifle at the ready, came outside. "I don't trust 'em far as I can throw a bull by the tail. One false move an' I'll give 'em a dose of lead they won't get over."

"I'll guarantee that there'll be no trouble," Dave promised.

*

HOWELL seemed to weigh the promise, then take it at its face value, for he followed Dave away from the barn back to the waiting knot of Cherokees. Joan was there, and after a quick glance assured her that her uncle was unhurt, she turned and smiled her gratitude at Dave.

The Cherokees were gabbling excitedly among themselves, paying no attention to Howell now. The rancher gestured at them with his gun. "Tell 'em to get out of here—pronto."

Dave shook his head. "They think you've got whiskey hidden in your barn."

Howell's face went livid. "They're loco!"

"Whiskey," Spotted Horse grunted. "Plenty whiskey in barn."

For a moment Dave thought Howell was going to shoot the Cherokee down. Then the rancher got control of himself, shrugged and said to Dave, "He's lying, I tell you!"

"There's an easy way to find out," Dave answered quietly. "I'm going in and search the place."

Howell stiffened. "Are you takin' a thieving redskin's word over mine?"

"I'm going in," Dave repeated. "Get out of my way."

He moved forward toward the barn, closely followed by Spotted Horse and two of the Cherokees. Then, as he was starting to pass Howell, the rancher reached out and seized his arm. The man's face was taut with anger. "No nosey Indian agent is goin' to snoop around my property!" he snapped.

Dave shook off the hand and kept walking. Suddenly Howell lifted his gun, swung the heavy barrel down toward Dave's head. Joan screamed a warning. Dave dove to one side, went down toward Howell, and the rifle barrel struck him a glancing blow across the shoulder.

The shock dazed him for an instant, then anger flooded over him. One hand closed on Howell's ankle. He jerked hard, at the same time rising to one knee. Howell lost his balance and fell, landing on his back with such force that the breath flew out of him and the rifle dropped from his hands.

Dave scrambled to his feet and drew his gun. Howell's sudden attack had taken him by surprise, but now the surprise was replaced with a cold anger. "Get up," he said. "We're going into that barn. If there's whiskey there—"

He didn't finish. Already Spotted Horse and his companions had hurried into the barn. A wild shout arose from inside now and a figure staggered out into the light carrying a large stone jug in each hand.

"Whiskey!" Dave breathed.

Madness ran through the Cherokees like flame through dry tinder. Laughing,

shouting, singing, they crowded into the barn, emerging moments later laden with jugs of whiskey. There was no use trying to stop them, Dave knew. He could only stand by helplessly and hope that they would move on once they had carried out all the whiskey.

Howell kept cursing softly, his face twisted with anger and hate. Joan stood nearby, frozen by the spectacle. She at least, Dave thought grimly, was innocent. Or was she?

At last the Cherokees had emptied the barn of its hidden cache. With final whoops of delight and derision, they mounted and rode away. Dave turned grimly to Howell. This man was responsible for a long list of crimes.

"You're under arrest, Howell. I'm taking you to Small Fork tonight. Miss Neal, go saddle his horse."

The girl's eyes flashed. "You can't take him! He didn't do it—he couldn't have done it!"

"I've got eyes," Dave said softly. "Get that horse."

"I'll run you out of the country," Howell snapped. "Why, you ignorant young fool, I'll—"

Dave felt suddenly weary of words, sick of the deceit which he knew now had been all around him for so long. "Save it for the jury. There's a shipment of payment gold due in from Fort Smith in the morning. I'm sending you back with the escort. And I hope . . ." He let the words trail off. He didn't know just what he did hope.

Joan went and got the horse. Still holding the gun on the rancher, Dave motioned him into the saddle then mounted his own horse. Joan stood looking up at her uncle and in her eyes was a misery Dave knew he would never forget. As he started to ride away, she turned her face to him and murmured, "I hope you're satisfied. And I wish I could tell you how much I hate you!"

Dave made a weary gesture with his shoulders as he motioned Howell to move on. There was no satisfaction in him. . . .

TIRED though he was, Dave didn't sleep much that night. There was no jail in Small Fork, so he was forced to lock Howell in the tiny back room of the Indian agency, handcuffing one wrist to the iron cot there. He himself slept on the office floor.

He dozed fitfully for a few hours, awakening as the first gray of dawn crept into the room. His body was stiff from his uncomfortable bed and his right shoulder ached painfully from the blow from Howell's rifle. His head felt dull and heavy. He stretched, then sat down on the desk edge and rolled a cigarette while his mind grappled with pieces of the puzzle which still did not fit.

Were Howell and Woodstock working together? If so, had Woodstock killed Deputy Cook and the thief Burgess without Howell's knowledge? Which one had thrown the Mexican knife? How had Spotted Horse got the mate to the first knife?

Dave shook his head in irritation. Somehow, he still felt a shred of doubt as to Howell's guilt in the whiskey-peddling and Woodstock's guilt in the two murders. But there was no concrete evidence to back up that doubt. On the face of it, any jury would sentence both men to hang.

Frowning, he opened the desk drawer and took out the two knives. Their size, shape, weight—even their evidences of wear—were identical. They had belonged to the same man, there was no doubt of that. But to whom? Woodstock? Howell? Or to some unknown third person?

He balanced the knives idly in his hand or a time, thinking.

Suddenly a grim smile touched his lips. Slipping one knife into the waistband of his trousers, he laid the other on a stack of papers on the desk, as if as a paper weight. He moved the chair so that the knife would be within easy reach of a man sitting there, then left the office and went to the hotel for breakfast.

When he had eaten, he got a plate of ham and eggs and a pot of coffee and brought them back to the office. Unlocking the door to the back room, he looked in.

Howell was awake, sitting up as far as his shackled wrist would permit. His unshaven face bristled gray-black in the early morning light.

"How about some breakfast?" Dave asked.

Howell grunted an unintelligible answer. Dave crossed the room and unlocked the handcuffs, being careful to keep at a safe distance from the rancher. "You can go out in the office and eat," he said. "I'll be right behind you with a gun, so don't try anything foolish."

Howell got up stiffly and walked into the other room. Holstering the gun, Dave watched him sit down and pitch into the food. Howell's appetite, he noticed, hadn't been impaired.

When the rancher was on his second cup of coffee, Dave sauntered across the room to the window, deliberately turning his back to Howell. A nerve in his back quivered. Maybe he was a fool, giving Howell a chance like this. But he had to know. He wondered how quick a man could pick up and throw a knife.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Howell's glance circle the room. It fell on the knife, settled there.

Howell took a long sip at his coffee, put down the cup, then reached out for the knife. Dave shifted his weight ever so slightly. If he lifts it higher than his shoulder, he thought, I'll draw!

Howell grasped the hilt of the knife, lifted it. Then carelessly, almost deliberately, he started picking his teeth with the point.

Dave relaxed. A wagon rumbled by in the street, breaking the silence in the room. Was the rancher really ignorant of how to handle a knife? he wondered. Or had he seen through the trap?

Howell tossed the knife down on the desk and grunted, "Guess it's no use to tell you you're makin' a mistake."

Dave shook his head. "What I saw in the barn wasn't any mistake."

"That whiskey wasn't mine. It was planted there."

"By who?"

"How should I know? There's lots of people in the Territory that hate ranchers."

Dave shrugged. "Maybe. And maybe you can convince a federal jury of that. All I know is that you're going back to Fort Smith as soon as that gold shipment comes in."

Howell lapsed into a taciturn silence and Dave took him into the back room and handcuffed him to the bed, locking the door to the room when he returned to the office.

The street outside was rapidly filling with Cherokees. This was the biggest day of the month for Small Fork. Both the weekly train from Kansas City and the allotment gold from Fort Smith were due today, and from miles around the Indians were gathering. Stores, barber shops, soft drink parlors and restaurants would do a land-office business today.

Dave noticed with relief that there was a generous sprinkling of Indian police mingling with the crowd on the street. They were tall, broad-chested men with keen eyes and intelligent faces—the very cream of Cherokee manhood. They would keep disorder at a minimum.

Suddenly he heard angry shouts outside, swelling in volume along the street as they came nearer. Frowning, he went to the door. Trouble had started already.

Staring down the street to the east, he saw a close packed mass of Cherokees milling about. Three horsemen were forcing their way through. Two of the men were Indian police and the other was a white man. He was hurt, Dave could see, and was being partially supported by the two Cherokees.

The riders drew near. The white man was in a bad way. Clotted blood soaked the leg of his denims and a big stain high up on his left shoulder showed plainly against the flannel shirt. The man's face was haggard with pain, but he managed to raise his eyes and look at Dave.

"Howdy, Dave," he gasped. "Sorry about the gold—sorry we didn't make it—"

Dave stood stock-still, for the moment frozen with shock. The man was Jim Hopkins, one of the three deputies who always rode escort on the gold shipment. And the other two deputies were not with him!

CHAPTER FOUR

You Can't Trust a Mad Dog!

SUDDENLY Hopkins toppled forward and would have fallen from the saddle, if Billy Barefoot, one of the Indian police, had not caught him. Dave moved forward.

"Hand him down, Billy. Those wounds need looking after."

Hopkins was lifted carefully to the ground and laid out on the boardwalk in the shade of the office. Dave, cutting the blood-soaked clothes away, could see that the officer had bled a good deal. While he dressed the wounds, Billy Barefoot told him what few details he knew about the robbery.

The gold shipment had been ambushed five miles east of town. The other two deputies had been killed in the first volley, without even a chance to draw their guns. Hopkins, after an exchange of shots, had managed to slip away.

"The gold?" Dave asked.

"They got it all," Billy answered. "They were careful not to kill the pack mules."

"Were they white men or Indians?" Dave wanted to know.

"White." Six of them, Hopkins said, and they were all masked."

Dave turned the information over in his mind, trying to make it fit with the events of the past week. It was obvious that Howell was not involved in this, for he was still handcuffed securely to the cot inside.

Woodstock, then? If so, who were the other white men? On the face of it, it looked as though each act of violence of late was independent of the others, but a stubborn instinct made him feel that one gang was responsible for them all. Where was the key piece that would make the bloodstained puzzle fit together in a logical pattern?

Finishing the bandages, he stood up. News of the robbery had spread with the rapidity of a prairie fire. Cherokees were crowding around now, gabbling excitedly. The Indians, faced with the loss of their allotment, were demanding swift and decisive action.

Dave turned to Billy Barefoot. "Did you try to trail the thieves?"

The Indian shook his head. "We had to bring Hopkins in first. But we're going back."

Dave nodded. "Good. If you should catch the gang, try to bring every one of them in alive."

"I'll do what I can. But I'm afraid my people are too angry to let them live long."

Dave knew the Cherokee spoke the truth. Standing on the boardwalk, he watched the crowd break up and head toward the spot where the robbery had occurred. Afoot, in wagons, on horseback they went, blind with a wild lust for vengeance.

They'd never locate the gang, he knew. Even Indians, superb trailers that they were, couldn't follow a trail far in that rocky mountain wilderness. Particularly when they were so worked up.

Where would the gang go? The Cherokees would block off every trail leading out of the Territory so tightly that a snake couldn't slip through. Yet, Dave reflected, the gang had some way of smuggling whiskey in, despite all precautions; it was logical that they should smuggle the gold out over the same route.

On a hunch, he decided suddenly to ride to Woodstock's shack. If he could catch the trapper unawares, he might find the whole gang there.

He made arrangements with Len Hargis' wife to nurse the wounded officer, then found a spring wagon and took Hopkins to the house and put him to bed. Renting a horse at the livery stable, he returned to his office and went into the back room. Howell looked at him balefully.

"How much longer have I got to wait? Ain't the gold shipment got here yet?"

Dave set a bucket of water and a dipper down on the floor within the rancher's reach. "No," he said grimly, "and it may never get here. I'm going out for a while —here's some water if you get thirsty."

"Where you goin'?"

"To get some company to take back to Fort Smith with you," Dave snapped, then closed and locked the door from the outside.

He was riding a wiry chestnut today and he pushed the horse along at a stiff trot. The sun hung halfway up the sky now and its heat brought the sweat out on Dave's body. As he moved deeper into the wilderness, the timber grew denser, shutting off the rays of the sun, but also killing what little breeze there was.

He knew he was taking a long chance. If his guess was right—if Woodstock really was the head of the gang—he might

find half a dozen heavily armed men at the trapper's shack. Yet he had to play it alone, for he couldn't trust the enraged Cherokees to help him now.

A mile away from the clearing where Woodstock's shack stood, he dismounted and led the chestnut into a dense thicket and tied him there. He circled around through the timber and approached the cabin from the north, moving against the slight south wind so that the dogs would not scent him and give the alarm.

Underfoot the ground felt soft and springy, leaf mold and rotted wood cushioning his steps. He carried a .44 Winchester in his hand, ready for instant use, and on his hip rested the Colt. A shallow creek wound through a timbered hollow, and he waded across in the ankle-deep, chill water, then crept up the hill toward the clearing where the cabin was located.

As he neared it he heard the sound of music. He halted. A fiddle was wailing a mournful yet hauntingly beautiful tune. Instinctively, he marveled that a murderer should play so well.

Easing up to the edge of the clearing, he surveyed it carefully. Woodstock sat on a stump in the shade of a spreading oak tree half a dozen yards downhill from the shack. Beside him lay his two dogs, dozing as they listened to the fiddle music. No one else was in sight.

Dave stepped out into the clearing, rifle leveled at his waist. "Don't take your hands off that fiddle," he said.

★

THE music stopped. Woodstock turned his head unhurriedly, as if he had known that Dave was coming. The dogs got up, snarling. "If one of them moves, I'll kill you before he jumps twice," Dave snapped.

Woodstock's eyes glittered—with amusement, Dave thought. "Quiet," the trapper said, and the dogs lay back down. Woodstock put the fiddle on his lap and motioned Dave closer. "I figgered you'd be lookin' me up soon."

Watching him suspiciously, Dave moved nearer. "Because you knew I'd find out who did the killings?" he said.

Woodstock shook his head. "You ain't found out nothin' about those killings. You think I done it. I knew you would. That's why I run away."

"If you didn't kill them, who did?"

"The same man that killed the two deppitys this mornin'."

Dave stiffened. "How did you know about that?"

"I seen it."

Dave frowned and shot a quick glance around the clearing. Was Woodstock stalling for time until some of his accomplices showed up? Or was he telling the truth?

"Start at the beginning," he snapped, "and tell me all you know."

The trapper looked at the gun, smiled slightly. "You sure got a suspicious nature, youngster. I didn't kill Red Burgess or the deppity—I jest found 'em dead, like I told you. I got a kind of curious mind, so I took a look around in the bushes by that hollow."

"So did I," Dave cut in, "and didn't find a thing but three empty rifle shells."

"Your eyes ain't as good as mine. The ground was too hard to trail, but from the way the bushes was broken and from a print I found in a soft spot, I knowed the killer wasn't no woodsman. First place, he was wearin' shoes 'stead of moccasins or boots. Second place, he didn't know much about handlin' a gun."

"Why do you say that?"

" 'Cause he shot Red Burgess first—an' Red was handcuffed. If he'd been experienced in gunfights, he'd a cracked down on the deppity first, bein' as he was the one with the gun."

Dave nodded, admitting that the logic was good. "How did you know who he was? How about the bloody letters *W, O* Cook wrote?"

Woodstock held up his hand. "Don't git to jumpin' around so, youngster, an' I'll tell you everything. I didn't know who the killer was—then. But I found out today. I was comin' through the woods this mornin' when I heard shootin'. I got there too late to help, but I seen half a dozen masked hombres shoot two deppitys, run another'n off, and haze away the mules with the gold. Couple of Indian police came along just then, and I figgered they'd find the deppity that got away, so I come home to wait for you."

"You still haven't told me who the killer was."

Woodstock fingered his beard reflectively. "I don't know his name, but I bet you will. He was leadin' the gang this mornin'. A short, fat, greasy little feller with a funny way of spittin' out his words. He dropped sumpthin' when he rode away." Woodstock fished in his pocket. "An' I brung it along."

The trapper held out his hand, opened it. A heavy gold watch lay there, a broken bit of chain dangling from it. Dave took the watch. He stared at it for several moments while half a dozen disconnected events flashed into his mind, taking shape now in a clear pattern. . . .

He saw a short fat man pacing up and down a station platform, from time to time taking a gold watch out of his pocket to check the time.

He heard the dull *thuck* of a thrown knife sinking in the wood close to his throat as he stepped out of the office.

He saw the two letters, *W, O,* written in blood in a clearing where death lay.

"Bonzelli!" he breathed.

"Eh? How's that?" Woodstock said quickly.

"Antonio Bonzelli—he's head cook at the Crossroads. Someone threw a knife at me. I thought it was Mexican, but it wasn't—it was the Italian chef. Cook saw him but didn't know his name. Cook tried to tell me. 'Wop'—that's what he was spelling out when he died."

Woodstock laid aside the fiddle and stood up, nodding vigorously. "Now you're figgerin' straight, youngster. I knew you had a head on your shoulders. All you needed was a start in the right direction."

Dave was too preoccupied to answer. Now that the key piece had been found, the puzzle was fitting together rapidly. Bonzelli had thrown the knife, suspecting, probably, that Burgess had already talked. Later, when he discovered that the outlaw had not confessed, he had given the other knife to Spotted Horse, in order to throw off suspicion. He had also followed Burgess and Cook and ambushed them so that neither could ever tell what he knew.

Howell had claimed that the whiskey had been planted in his barn. Dave believed that now. Bonzelli had been out of the hotel last night—the chicken which had not tasted right had not been cooked by his hand—and he had incited the Cherokees to riot and attack Howell's ranch. Why, Dave didn't know, but the reason for that could wait.

He turned to Woodstock. "Got any idea where the gang went to?"

The trapper nodded. "My guess is they circled town, come in from the other side an' went right straight to the Crossroads Hotel."

"And my guess is that you're right—that's just what they'd do! Are you game to give me a hand in smoking them out?"

Woodstock tugged at his beard and a sly smile came to his eyes. "I sure am, youngster. Been a long time since I had any excitement. Wait'll I go git my gun."

Woodstock turned and started up the hill toward his shack. Suddenly there was a movement in the thicket nearby. Light glittered on a menacing rifle barrel, and a heavily accented voice said, "You weel not need your gun, Signor Gray-Beard. And you—standing there by the stump, I mean—drop the rifle and raise your hands. Queekly, please, or we weel shoot."

★

FOR the brief space of half a dozen seconds Dave stood motionless, weighing his chances for shooting it out. The dogs were on their feet, snarling. Woodstock spoke sharply to them and they quieted down.

Suddenly the rifle in the thicket roared. A slug dug up dirt close to Dave's feet, caroming off into the distance with a wicked whine.

"Drop it, I say!" a voice snapped.

Reluctantly, Dave dropped the gun.

Not until then did Bonzelli come out of the thicket. His dark face was creased with a smile, but his sharp little eyes glittered with hate. Beside him walked two stocky drummers, their checked suits making a weird contrast to the wilderness background behind them. Both held short-barreled, large-caliber pistols.

Bonzelli's eyes flicked to the handle of the slim knife which Dave had thrust under his belt. "Eet ees so kind of you," he purred, "to take good care of my knife."

"I'd like to give it back to you," Dave answered quietly, "just the way you tried

to give it to me. Only my aim would be better. How did you follow me?"

"We see you ride along the trail. Then for a while you are lost to us in the woods. So we come here—just in time to hear very interesting talk between you and Signor Gray-Beard."

"What do you want?"

Bonzelli shrugged. "You are a clever young man. Too clever. We think perhaps you know too much."

Dave's steady gaze moved from Bonzelli to the two drummers. He had seen them many times in the lobby of the Crossroads; they made the trip into the Territory once every two weeks. No wonder he had been unable to learn who was in the gang.

"I know a lot of things now," he said. "I know that the big sample cases the drummers brought in held liquor, not merchandise. I know that you threw the knife at me."

"Yes." Bonzelli nodded, smiling, well pleased with himself.

"But," Dave continued, "there's one thing I don't know yet. Is Dyke Scott mixed up in this?"

Bonzelli shrugged. "But, of course. It was his idea."

"Why did he frame Howell?"

"When ranchers move in, traders and trappers must soon move out. Scott is a very good—how do you say it—man of business?"

The puzzle was complete now, Dave thought bleakly, now—when it was too late to do any good. He had no doubts about Bonzelli's intentions. The little chef would never let him and Woodstock leave this clearing alive.

Looking at the trapper, Dave knew that he realized it, too. Yet he didn't appear worried. His face still held its usual bland, calm expression and in his eyes was a slight twinkle that might have been amusement.

Bonzelli and the two drummers were cautiously moving nearer. Dave's nerves bunched as he waited for a slight relaxation of their wariness. Better to die fighting than to stand frozen like a pig for the butchering.

Bonzelli gestured with the rifle. "Take his gunbelt," he ordered.

One of the drummers started toward Dave. Suddenly Woodstock made a strange whistling sound in his throat. It was a small thing, yet so startling that both Bonzelli and the drummers turned to stare at him in surprise.

And, like two shadows released by a powerful spring, the dogs leaped.

Bonzelli shouted a curse and swung his rifle to bear on the dogs. Two pistols barked simultaneously, and one of the beasts crumpled in mid-air, dead before it hit the ground. Dave clawed at his gun.

"Give me the knife!" Woodstock shouted.

Snatching the knife from his belt, Dave tossed it to the trapper, hilt first, and Woodstock caught it deftly. One of the drummers was down, beating with the barrel of his pistol at the dog snapping at his throat. The other drummer was aiming at Woodstock. Dave flung a quick shot at him, missed, and saw Woodstock reel groggily as the drummer's pistol boomed.

Bonzelli swung his rifle around to bear on Dave. Dave lunged forward, stumbled. He was conscious that Woodstock had closed with the drummer, that the dog was holding his own with the man on the ground, then all thought was blotted out by the roar of Bonzelli's gun. Something exploded in his head. He went blind for an instant.

He fell to his hands and knees, retaining consciousness by only a slim thread. Bonzelli was a hazy, dancing figure in an uncertain red mist. The rifle was leveled, a look of exultation was on the Italian's face. Feebly Dave lifted the Colt, fired. He felt the gun buck in his hand, heard an ear-splitting roar.

Bonzelli staggered back. The rifle dropped from his hands, then with a low moan he crumpled to the ground.

Silence hung in the clearing now. Dave shook his head savagely, trying through sheer force of will to make his eyes focus properly. The effort tired him.

Strength drained from him, and he pitched forward on his face with a sigh....

★

THE first sound he heard when consciousness returned was the worried whimpering of a dog. A terrible pain throbbed through his head with each

beat of his pulse, but he struggled to his feet and stared around the clearing.

Bonzelli lay where he had fallen, unmoving. Nearby lay the two gun-toting drummers.

The dog had accounted for one, Dave noticed grimly; Woodstock and the knife had taken care of the other. One of the dogs was dead. The other kept trotting back and forth between his dead mate and Woodstock, who was sitting with his back to the oak tree awkwardly trying to bandage a bleeding leg.

Dave moved toward him. "You all right?" he asked.

The trapper's face was pale, but as he looked up now the old glint of mild amusement glittered in his eyes. "Never felt better," he said. His eyes held Dave's for a moment, then strayed back to the dead dog and remained there. "The best dog a man ever had," he murmured softly.

Dave took a look at the trapper's wound, then picked up his Colt, reloaded it and thrust it into the holster. The injury was in the fleshy part of the upper leg but the slug had luckily missed the bone. So long as Woodstock did not try to walk, he would be all right.

"Confounded thing!" the trapper complained. "Guess you'll have to go to Small Fork by yourself."

"I'll manage," Dave said. He looked up at the sun. It hung straight above and he realized that there was no time to waste. He had to get to Small Fork before the north-bound train left for Kansas City.

Taking a bucket from the shack, he went down to the spring and filled it and carried it back to Woodstock. "I've got to get moving," he said. "You just sit here and take it easy. I'll send somebody out from town to patch you up."

The trapper nodded. "Good luck, youngster."

Dave picked up the Winchester and started down the trail toward the spot where he had left his horse. He'd need all the good luck anybody could wish him, he knew—and then some.

* * *

The sun was a white-hot flame that licked at his bare head as he rode down Small Fork's Main Street. The ugly wound in his scalp pulsed rhythmically with a terrible pain. Strength had long since left him and he moved groggily now and from time to time he had to close his eyes tightly to clear his vision.

The street was deserted. He could see wagons drawn up at the station two blocks away, and by that knew that the train had not yet left. He thought of Howell as he passed his office, but did not stop. Time enough to release the rancher after he had finished more pressing business.

He dismounted at the hitch-rail next to the station, leaned for a moment against the chestnut to rest, then walked slowly to the platform. Only a small crowd of whites was here today. The Cherokees were all absent, still futilely searching the mountains for the thieves, he guessed.

No one was on hand who would be of any use in a fight. He smiled grimly. He hadn't expected to find help here.

Suddenly, across the platform, he saw the men he sought. Two more drummers, looking very business-like in their city suits, stood beside half a dozen large sample cases. Dyke Scott was talking to them amiably.

This is it! Dave thought, and started walking toward them. A look of amazement flashed across Scott's face when he saw Dave, then he got control of himself and said with a frown.

"My God, Dave, what happened to your head? Have an accident?"

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Dave halted, spreading his feet wide to keep his balance. He wished this dizziness would leave him.

"No," he said slowly. "Not an accident."

A Negro flunkey came up, and Scott turned his attention to him. "The train's about ready to leave, Sam. Better put these cases in the baggage car."

The Negro started to pick up one of the sample cases. Dave snapped, "Leave it alone."

The Negro looked up, startled, then sensing something from the expression on Dave's face he backed off a couple of paces. The drummers broke off their conversation.

Scott scowled. "What do you mean?" he snapped.

"Bonzelli's dead," Dave said tonelessly. "So are a couple of his friends. And there's enough evidence in those sample cases to hang all three of you."

"You're crazy!"

Dave gestured at one of the drummers. "Open up that case."

Nobody moved. The drummers were visibly nervous now. Dave Scott's eyes narrowed, then he said smoothly, "if you're that suspicious, why don't you open them yourself?"

Dave smiled faintly, nodding. "I will." With an unhurried motion he drew his Colt from its holster, cocked it and fired. A sample case, its lock torn loose, fell open as the heavy slug ripped through it, spilling some of its metallic contents out on the platform. Sunlight glittered dully from polished gold coins.

"There's the evidence," Dave said.

The drummers clawed at their hips. There was no mercy in Dave now, only a grim desire for vengeance. He shot one of the drummers as the man's gun lifted and he folded without a sound.

Fear suddenly overtook the other drummer. He let out a choking gasp, dropped his gun and turned to run. Dave let him go. He could be dealt with later.

Scott's gun was out. A slug ripped across Dave's ribs, knocking him down. Another splintered the platform before him, kicking dust into his eyes. Slowly, deliberately, without haste, he turned his gun on Scott and squeezed the trigger.

The shot went true. Scott clutched at his right shoulder with his left hand; the gun dropped from nerveless fingers. Dave smiled grimly. That was the way he wanted it—Dyke Scott would live to hang.

Men were running up now, shouting wild questions. Dave barely heard them. He was tired, very tired. If he could just lie down and rest for a few minutes, he thought, he'd be all right. Just for a few minutes. . . .

THE cool of evening had fallen when he opened his eyes. His head had a bulky feeling, but no longer hurt. He was lying on his own cot, he discovered, in the back room of his office. Someone was in the room.

He tried to raise up and a voice said, "Take it easy, mister. You're not going anywhere."

The voice was Joan Neal's. He looked at her for a moment, then relaxed with a sigh. "How'd I get here?"

"Uncle Jack and I brought you."

"But he was handcuffed to the bed."

"I turned him loose. You left the keys in the office."

Dave scowled at her and she shook her head, smiling. "No, I wasn't stealing your prisoner. I came into town this morning and found him here. I made him promise to wait for you before I took off the handcuffs. We saw you riding down the street when you came back to town this afternoon. We followed you to the station."

"How about Scott and the drummer?"

"The Cherokees are holding them for you. Not a dollar of the gold is missing."

Dave nodded in satisfaction. There was no reason for him to get up for a while. Besides, it was pleasant lying here with Joan smiling down at him. He wondered if she would hold his hand if he acted like he had a fever.

"Your uncle must feel pretty sore at me for arresting him," he said.

The girl laughed. "Uncle Jack says you've got more real nerve than anybody he ever knew. He thinks you're a mighty fine young man."

Dave turned his head slightly and gazed out the window. . . . Out to the future that was before him in this splendid country—with Joan.

THE END

HIGH ADVENTURE AHEAD!

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RAIDERS OF WILDERNESS EMPIRE

By Harry F. Olmsted

CHAPTER ONE

Wilderness Decoy

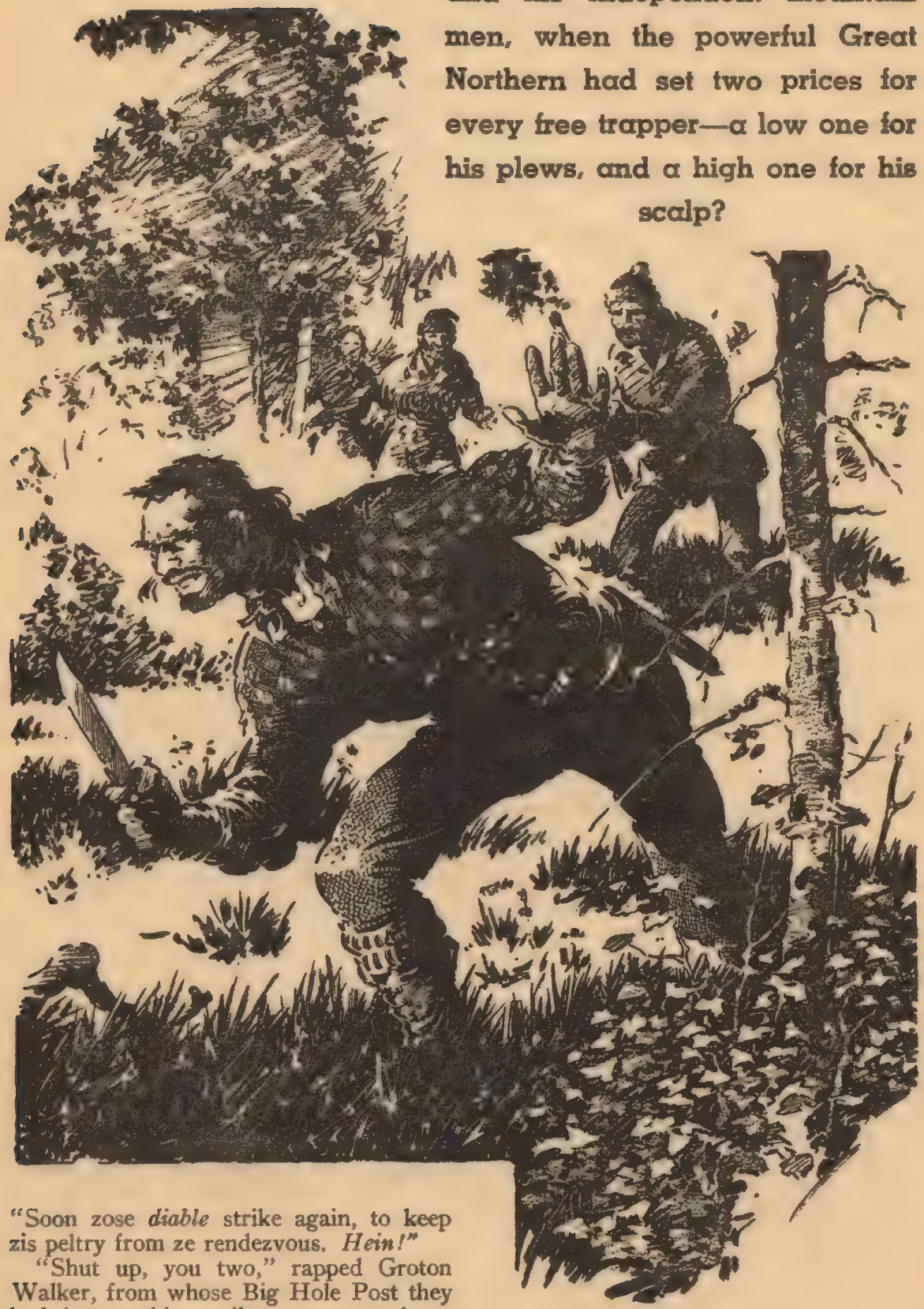
ALDER fires burned low in the bend of the Great River, letting blackness engulf nine pig-like batteaux and a canoe, nosed up on the sandy bank. To Peter Bendamon, wrapped in his blanket, it was like night creeping in to overwhelm the camp. And he sighed, weary of a vigilance unbroken for bitter, gruelling weeks. Beside him, little Pierre Belette stirred. "You not sleep too, Pete?"

Peter's worry edged his answer. "Ten days since they jumped us last, for their third straight licking, Pierre. It's not like Great Northern to waste the days."

"Worry. . . .*pouf!*" Pierre snapped his fingers. "Sleep, *mon enfant,* for w'en ze Great Bear point hees nose west, we stand guard." Peter heard him sniff the breeze.

He swung the pitch knot as he rose up. . . .

What chance had Peter Bendamon and his Independent mountain men, when the powerful Great Northern had set two prices for every free trapper—a low one for his plews, and a high one for his scalp?



"Soon zose *diable* strike again, to keep zis peltry from ze rendezvous. *Hein!*"

"Shut up, you two," rapped Groton Walker, from whose Big Hole Post they had begun this perilous water trek to Musselshell rendezvous. "If you don't

Fur-Country Novel

sleep, you'll be heavy eyed tomorrow. I don't want you dull witted, now that we're almost there."

"If we run into a gun-trap and go under," Peter said grimly, "remember your discipline and formations. Fight through like we were with you. You'll make it."

Walker grunted and talk languished. Sleeping trapliners, Indians and breeds, tossed restlessly. The river's voice rose and fell, murmuring endless warnings, as the night throbbed with the menace of a merciless, uncompromising force—the Great Northern Fur and Peltry.

Peter slept after a time, and it seemed only minutes before Pierre was shaking him. The guard was being changed. An obloid moon soared in an untroubled sky, lighting the night world, making targets of sleeping men. But here the river was wide and any attack must come from upriver. Peter watched a bend, several hundred yards up stream, where turbulent water and writhing willows gave him bad moments.

Rejecting optical illusions, Peter fought his drowsiness fiercely and with indifferent success until a shivery, nerve-tingling howl filled the night, the cry of the timber wolf. Pierre too was touched. He came to Peter's side. *"Mon Dieu,"* he husked. "Bad tam for dat howl."

"Why, Pierre?"

"It mean man goin' die, queek."

"Nonsense. You don't believe those crazy Indian superstitions!"

The Canuck grunted. "My woman, she was half Cree. She tal me about dose *loup*, ma frien'. I believe her. Somebody goin' die; I tal you zat."

The cry fell away to echoes, then silence. A minute afterward, like an answer, a gun sound ran thinly upriver, distant yet savagely foreboding. Groton Walker sat up. "Did you boys hear a shot?"

"Rifle," said Peter. "At least a mile off."

"Who's shooting down there? Hunter shining deer, maybe?"

"Who knows? Might as easy be a warning. It would be like Great Northern to warn us that they're strong enough to throw away surprise and still destroy us."

The camp was awake now and, with the edge off their yesterday's weariness, the men built fires, boiled their kettles and toasted venison. Big daylight found everything stowed, the batteaux on the river. Each paddler had his primed rifle gun ready against the thwart, with powder, lead and spares in the lazeret where the captain stood at the sweep. Nine boats, staggered by threes, each with four paddle places, a sweepsman and the piled peltry amidships.

Four of the batteaux boasted only three paddlers; four fresh graves—unmarked and unsung, accounted for the absent ones. Peter and Pierre, scouting the way, danced out ahead of the shipment in a light canoe, Peter's voice rolling back. "Remember to keep formation. Wolves watch for stragglers."

Groton Walker, at the sweep of the lead boat, waved acknowledgment, and then the canoe was caught in the pull of the roaring rapids ahead. Gathering momentum, it was sucked into the swirl and spume of a roaring rock-studded millrace. The blades of the two paddlers bent and their muscles bunched beneath their buckskins. Picking swift, deep channels, they swerved around treacherous rocks and shoals where a single miscue would bring disaster. This pair was a team, master of a torrent and keen for conflict.

After a mile of this, the canoe shot onto placid water. The sun was rising, flashing its glare up-river, dazzling Peter's eyes as he gauged their position. They were opposite the west end of the Little Rockies, twenty miles north. The east end of this chain was due north of the Musselshell rendezvous. This, then, was the last rough water. There would, with luck, be three more camps, and four suns would find them beyond the menace of Great Northern.

Probing the glare ahead, Peter called excitedly: "The *Eliza Cook*—there she lies. First steamboat to pass the Yellowstone, looted and burned by renegade Crows."

They bore down on the bend, where the remains of a once proud stern-wheeler lay rotting in the mud. A leaning stack, charred timbers, rusted machinery, dimly to be discerned through a screen of willows. *"Que malhuer,"* breathed Pierre. "What bad luck. Ze poor mans who die zere, *mon ami*. . . ."

"And women," added Peter. "Eliza Cook, the captain's wife, and his twelve year old daughter. Neither was among the dead, but they've never been heard from."

"All mans die, eh?"

"Captain Cook came through. He set off powder stored to blast out snags. It killed some Indians on deck and blew him into the water. He let himself float away and after a terrible time, was saved. Cook's spent plenty trying to get trace of the women. They must be dead by this. . . ."

"Mon Dieu!" yelled Pierre, pointing with a dripping paddle. "Look! *Le fantome!* A ghost."

Peter's glance flashed to a ridgeback which pushed the river northward. And gooseflesh chilled his spine. Silhouetted there was a figure, a woman. But neither squaw, nor river breed, for this woman was white, and her dress so fashionable, so out of place, as to make her seem a phantom, in all truth.

"That's no ghost," Peter snapped, and swerved the canoe bankward. Shielding her eyes, the woman saw their purpose and was instantly agitated. She was fair, slender as an antelope. Corn colored hair, glinting in the sun, was caught in a white snood and topped by a funny little hat with a feather in it. Her blue gown, like those worn by fine Saint Louis ladies, was tightly bodiced, full flounced and rippling to the ground in dainty ruffles. She carried a red parasol.

Looking beyond them, she could hardly have missed the lead batteaux as it shot out of the rapids. That may have been what suddenly frightened her. She threw a birdlike glance across her shoulder, then called to them in a subdued voice: "Help me, please. I am in danger. Can you take me off?"

Peter lifted his hand, bent strongly to the paddle, driving the canoe toward the willows. Sensing his purpose, she gathered her skirts and the brush swallowed her as she came off the ridge. Pierre, idle through all this, seemed to be arguing some inner conflict, beating back some fear. "What zis lady do 'ere, eh?" he muttered. "Eet cannot be, *mon ami. Non,* zis mus' be a ghos'. Queek, we mus' hurry away."

"When we get her in the canoe," chuckled Peter, "pinch her, Pierre. If she slaps you, she's no ghost." He grounded the canoe, found no sign of the woman, heard no sounds of her progress. He sang out: "Are you coming down?"

No answer. Pierre muttered darkly of ghosts, and Peter laid his paddle down. "Ghosts, nothing. There's a steamboat tied up somewhere, taking on firewood. The lady has wandered away and got herself lost. Wait a minute."

He stepped to the bank and was arrested by a sudden rustling of brush—not from one direction, but from three. Even as his lips formed the word: "Trap!" gunfire battered his ear drums. He spun violently, lunging for his rifle in the boat.

He heard Pierre scream, *"Mon Dieu!,"* saw him rear up, twist dizzily and splash into the river, sinking in a red-stained current. The canoe tipped and was gulped down.

Peter clutched desperately at the prow of the canoe, conscious of the bullets churning the river surface. A slug burned across his hip and he dove. His hands were cleaving the water when his brain exploded in a blaze of red fire. He felt the waters engulf him, and knew no more.

★

HELPLESS in that half world between waking and sleeping, Peter suffered through an agony of blasting guns, savage yells and whining bullets. The Big Hole batteaux were fighting their way through the trap, as they had before. And Peter, aching to help, was numb and helpless.

The tumult of battle diminished, drew away and died. The haze began to lift, making Peter conscious of the pounding in his skull. When he could think, he knew something must have gone amiss with the attack. Had the girl waited to hail the lead batteaux, it must have succeeded. What mountain man, *coureur de bois* or *voyageur* could have rejected that tempting bait? What lonely, woman-hungry man could have spurned her cry?

Thus Peter condoned his error, without lessening his bitter self recriminations. He grieved only for Pierre, who was lost. Peter's work for Walker was finished

and, as for himself, he had never minimized the risk of bucking Great Northern, nor fooled himself that he could last long in the process.

He opened his eyes, closed them quickly against the agony of light. Gingerly, he felt the long, blood-encrusted bullet gash over his right ear. A quarter inch from death, that wound, but it frightened him less than the thought that he might have lost his trick capote, still safely on his head.

There was nobody about, so he crawled to the river's edge, bathed his head, drank his fill and felt better. He found his legs rubbery and was looking around for a place of concealment when the renegades came crashing back, cruel-eyed River Crows, a few taciturn breeds and a bearded, snag-tooth squawman with shell drops hanging from pierced ear lobes.

They caught him up, whisked him over the hill to a camp seething with activity, where saddled ponies and pole *travois* waited for loot from the River. Rifle-bearing warriors pacing restlessly, their glances turned downstream. Indian women packed the camp equipment. And yonder was a tawny-haired girl in buckskins, bronzed as an Indian. Even as they let him slump on his weakened legs, he knew she was the lady of the satin dress, dainty bonnet and red parasol.

Resigned to the savage judgment of whomever they waited for, Peter lay there trying vainly to catch the girl's eye. A murmur ran through the camp. Men came swinging in—six tall renegade Crows and a bearded white giant with a great shock of golden hair bared to the sun. His pale blue eyes, clouded now with fury, fell upon Peter. The man came to him, pulling at his curly blond beard.

"Hoi!" he boomed, and Peter knew him for a *Vide Poche* Creole, among the most cruel and treacherous fighters of furland. "We lose nine batteaux of pelt, eh, and got you. Dieu, w'at a bargain! Your pelt not bring much, my skinny porcupine. Get up w'en Guillot Flandres spik with you!"

Peter shook his head. "No legs."

"Non?" Guillot's acrid laughter rolled. He caught Peter's jacket, jerked him erect. "Thank a stupid woman, *mon homme,* that de fur got through. Or did she expec' to escape in de canoe? W'at you doin' ahead of dose batteaux? *Hein?"*

"Traveling down river; minding my own business."

"Dat *femme* not your business, *enfant.* W'at your name?"

"My name can mean nothing to you."

"Guillot not sure. Maybe you dat *diable,* Bendamon, w'at lead de independent against us. No?"

Peter forced a laugh. "Thanks for the compliment, Guillot."

Guillot scowled, studying him. Then, startlingly, he clubbed Peter across the cheek, knocking him flat. Peter grinned, his hate a fierce, fresh flame. "For that you better do the job complete, Guillot. If I get away, I'll kill you."

The Vide Poche was faintly amused. "But you not got away, ma frien'. I send you down to Buffalo Post to see if Jake Gildford, the *superieur,* he maybe know you."

Though Peter started inwardly, his face was a mask. Jake Gildford had been second in command at Great Northern's Swan River Post, when Peter had traded there. Jake would know him . . . and condemn him. Guillot, unable to read Peter's mind, toed him scornfully. "Dark Sky!" he bawled, summoning a lithe young Crow. "Guard dis man. Tak' him to Buffalo Pos'; watch him till Gildford return. If he escape, I cut out your heart. Come, *mes enfants!* We ride!"

There was a rush for saddled ponies, but Guillot paused to speak to the girl. "You spoil de show, *fille.* If I t'ink you plan it dat way, I. . . ."

"You'd beat me." She straightened proudly, eyes flashing. "Like you beat my mother before she died. Go ahead. I'm not afraid to die. I'd welcome it."

Fury convulsed the giant. He glared in silence for a minute, then: "Very well, ma'm'selle. W'en I come back, I bring you two choice—and one is de death you welcome. *Au 'voir."* He strode away, a fat squaw near the girl spitting after him. In a moment, he and his braves had galloped eastward, to set another trap for Groton Walker's batteaux, Peter thought. He knew with regret that he could not help them, but his long weeks of training would be there to beat back the vultures of Great Northern.

The squaws having finished packing camp paraphernalia, Dark Sky ordered Peter to his feet, and had to assist him. There being no mount for him, he was lashed to the wicker basket of a travois. Dark Sky and four older bucks rode their mustangs, while the squaws burdened the travois beasts. They lined out southward, heading toward the far snow-capped Snowies.

The start was late, the ponies poor. They camped that night in a woodland, scarcely twenty miles from the river. While the men smoked and rested, the women unpacked beside a stream, got fires going and supper ready. Peter, bruised and battered, wearied by the rough-jouncing travois, arms and legs numb from the lashings, watched with detached and hopeless interest. Darkness was falling and he was almost asleep when the honey-haired girl came with buffalo meat, toasted grain and water. She spoke a word to Dark Sky, knelt beside Peter.

"I'll get those tight thongs off," she announced.

"Don't bother," said Peter tartly. "I'd be afraid it was another trick."

She caught her breath. "I know," she murmured. "I had my choice. I suppose I should have chosen to warn you. . . .and die. I'm sorry. You must have suffered. But food and water will help."

He brooded, working blood into strangled limbs, studying her. Close up, she was not the lady of the sateen dress, being only about sixteen. "You said your mother was dead," he reminded her. "Was her name Eliza Cook?"

"Why—yes." Her breath came faster. "But how did you. . .?"

"Huh, you not talk!" glowered Dark Sky, moving toward them.

"Be still!" the girl rapped in Crow, and it was echoed by the fat squaw at the fire. "Guillot said guard this man, not torture him with hunger, thirst and tight thongs. Leave us alone."

The buck grunted, plainly wanting no trouble with shrill-voiced women. Peter said: "Everybody knows about Eliza and Nancy Cook. They still search for them. Your father escaped and spread the word."

She sighed. "I wish mother could have known. She hoped for three years, under dreadful abuse. When hope died, she died too. I go on living. . . ."

"To return to your father, Nancy. To cheer his last days. Come to me when the camp sleeps. We will leave here together."

She glanced fearfully at Dark Sky. "We cannot escape. We'd never get out of Guillot's country alive. We cannot carry food and would be soon overtaken. Even Humming Bird, Guillot's squaw and my second mother, would hunt for us. Maybe later, at the Post, I can. . . ."

"Tonight," argued Peter. "Once clear of this camp, I'll take chances on making the rendezvous at Musselshell. Who has my guns and knife?"

"Humming Bird has them. But Guillot can't bluff her. I can get them, but. . . ."

"Get them, Nancy. They may mean the difference between life and death." He pressed her fingers, washed down the last morsel of food and watched her walk studiously back to her foster mother's fire.

Dark Sky moved over to tie Peter up. "What her say?" he grunted.

Peter spoke in the Absaroka tongue. "That when I am killed at Buffalo Post, my spirit will haunt you if you draw the *babiche* too tight."

The Indian, inscrutible in spite of his superstition, grunted and tied less punishing knots. Now forms merged with the ground and the camp slept. Only Peter was awake, struggling against those cutting bonds. And Dark Sky, wrapped in his blanket, kept his ferret eyes on his prisoner.

CHAPTER TWO

Buckskin Trail of Death

WEARY and worn in a futile effort to slip the loosened thongs, Peter rested aching muscles. Unless Nancy desired escape more than she feared failure, he was doomed. He lay on the uncomfortable travois net, straining his ears for some hint of her approach, fighting sleep that might cost him his only chance.

Hours slipped away. Now and then a glance at Dark Sky showed the glint of starlight across his eyeballs, then came the moment when he looked and failed to

find that glint. The Indian slept, his chin on his chest, his breathing measured. And Peter made another but no more successful attempt to free himself. Then he paused, holding his breath, listening. His ears had picked up a faint slithering, like a snake wriggling through the grass.

"Psssst!"

Peter's heart leaped. Having seen Pierre toppled into the river in a stain of blood, he couldn't believe his ears. Cautiously, he answered the signal and the little Canuck came crawling out of the darkness to lay his knife against Peter's bonds.

"Come, *mon compagnon.*"

Peter's hand stayed him. "Give me your knife, Pierre. Then pick three ponies and cut the rest loose."

"Three, *mon ami?*"

"That girl is Captain Cook's daughter. She's going with us."

"Mon Dieu, ma frien', Pierre ees *un garçon*—a bachelor. And you, too. Leave *la fille* for anuzzer man. We 'ave 'ard tam to mak' ze rendezvous as eet is, wiz-out. . . ."

Dark Sky reared up, his buckskins rustling. He grunted, and leaped at Pierre, his scalping knife glittering. He caught the Canuck unprepared, drove his blade downward, and Pierre ducked. Peter's fingers found Dark Sky's throat.

Pierre spun to the fray and his Green River blade did its merciless work. Peter laid the limp buck down, every faculty keened to hints of a rousing camp. It had been swift and silent.

"The horses," whispered Peter. "I'll join you in a minute."

Pierre was sighing as he melted into the darkness.

Gripping Dark Sky's knife, Peter ghosted between sleeping forms to kneel beside Nancy's blanket, at Humming Bird's dead fire. His palm covered her lips and her quick pressure revealed her wakefulness. "I've got your pistols," she breathed. "And I was about to make the try."

"Come quickly," he ordered. "Walk light."

She arose without sound. Her hand in his, they moved between sleeping Indians with only the faintest swishing of buckskins. A squaw stirred, moaned. Peter and Nancy froze, breath held until the restless woman slept again. Passing silent Dark Sky, they came to where ponies snorted as they fed. Here Pierre, leading three animals by their tethers, was cutting the rest free.

Peter helped Nancy up, shocked to find her weeping. "Steady, girl. You've prayed for this chance."

"I know," she sighed. "But Humming Bird's been so kind. . . ." She buried her face in the tight bundle she clung to.

Peter patted her arm, whipped a loop about the pony's muzzle, handed her the rope. A moment later they were easing the herd across the grasslands. It took nearly an hour to cover that first mile. Then, beyond ear-shot, they broke the animals into a run. Hour after hour, they held the lope, following the Crooked Creek Trail leading to Musselshell rendezvous.

Dawn found them far from their start and, with luck, twenty miles ahead of pursuit. Here they quit the loose ponies, continuing on. If Peter had it figured right, they had fifty miles to travel, a long way in country dominated by Great Northern's cruel partisans and auxiliaries.

The sun rose and they commenced casting nervous glances behind. But not until the night mists had dissipated did Peter lead them to a high butte for a look backward. Yonder they saw the intermittent puffs of the smoke signal. Sharp, savage eyes would pick up that intelligence. The manhunt would quicken.

"That's for Guillot, the devil!" murmured Nancy. "We must hurry."

"Where was Guillot leading his men?" asked Peter.

The girl shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe Musselshell rendezvous. I heard him talking about throwing a ring of guns around it. We must split that ring. The river would be our easiest and best chance."

"Not without a boat. We must depend on the horses, and avoid the trail. Let's cross the creek now."

They reined to the trail again, Pierre unduly silent as he wrestled with the pain of a sore but superficial wound. Now he dismounted, laid his ear against the earth. "Zey come now, by gar!" he announced. "Ver' fas'. We ron fas', or we lose ze hair. *Hein!*"

He remounted, his fingers curling emptily for his lost rifle. Peter led the way, Nancy following and Pierre bringing up the rear, a fierce gleam in his dark eyes. They pushed through tangled willow, rose and choke-cherry, forded the lusty flow of Crooked Creek and picked their way in water for a mile before taking to the brushy north bank. After that, it was an endless struggle, fighting brush, cutbanks and swarming mosquitoes. Hard, punishing work, and heartbreakingly slow.

The day wore away and night poured into the bottomlands. Through all the torment of hunger, insects and fatigue, Nancy didn't complain. No longer a daughter of civilization, her captive life had hardened her, made her stoical as an Indian. The time came when Peter, priding himself on his stamina, was exhausted, his sore head pounding.

Pierre groaned, confessing he'd had enough. Light was waning; mosquitoes rose in clouds and they were famished. But mostly their bodies cried out for rest. Peter led the way onto higher ground.

On an open ridge, with grass for weary animals and a breeze to discourage stinging insects, they stretched out to sleep. Across the creek, not a mile away, a small fire twinkled merrily. There was probably food at that camp. Certainly there were enemies—bound by the pledge of blood.

★

LONG before dawn, Peter roused his sleeping companions. The sky was partly overcast and it was black dark. The fire across the creek was out, but eastward the clouds showed the rosy reflection of rendezvous fires where sensation-starved men drank and gambled and kicked up their heels with sphynx-faced squaws.

Peter again handed Nancy onto her mount, smiling at her care of a blanket-wrapped bundle. "The dress?" he asked.

"Mother's things. She danced in them, the night the packet was attacked. They are stained with her tears. I shall keep them always."

"They must have made her as beautiful as you were," he said, softly, "when you stood in the morning sun, above the river. Was it your idea to wear them. . .?"

"Guillot made me," she broke in fiercely. "If I had refused, he would have burned them."

She said no more about it, nor did he. They rode with hollow stomachs, depending upon the ponies to pick the way. By Peter's reckoning, it was twenty miles yet to rendezvous. Half that distance northward lay the river, taking all drainage from the high ground on their left. With no tributaries feeding in from the north they now had open going, skirting thick patches of rose. The rested ponies had covered ten precious miles by sun-up.

Peter's pleasure at the progress was tempered by the sudden influx of a well-beaten trail, angling in from the river and leading to its junction with the Musselshell. Knowing it would be guarded, Peter drew up. "It's a two-hour lope to the rendezvous, maybe two days if we quit the ponies and go it afoot. Two days will see us pretty weak for lack of food. Pierre, you've been without longest; which will it be?"

Nancy, catching the Canuck's troubled glance on her, said: "Don't mind me. Do as you'd do if I wasn't along."

"Bon!" exploded Pierre. "We keep to ze 'orse. We follow ze trail. Eef dose *maudits* stop us, we fight!"

Well satisfied, Peter consigned Nancy to Pierre, loped to a hundred yard lead and held his pony to a hand gallop. Two miles sped beneath the animal's flashing

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hoofs. The trail narrowed to a mere slot between walls of willow, a place breathing menace.

Peter was tense as he rode, ready for whatever prank Fate chose to play. And suddenly Fate stood before him as he rounded a bend in the trail—Fate in the rifle-bearing persons of an Indian and towering, slab-like Guillot Flandres. The white man thundered a command to halt.

For the fraction of an instant, Peter wondered if their hard-won freedom was to be blighted here? Nancy returned to the hell of captivity instead of the arms of her father? And Peter's life and Pierre's snuffed out like tallow dips? Then Peter roared his answer, loud enough for Pierre's ears, jerked a pistol and rode at them.

Crimson gunflame exploded at Peter as he fired. He saw the Indian go down, face contorted, a black hole between his eyes. Peter's pony, mad with fright, reared high and shuddered as a bullet struck it mortally. Catlike, Peter flung free and fired again. The bullet struck Guillot's rifle as he poured a powder charge. The gun hammered from his grasp, and Guillot roared:

"So, you try to tear me down? *Bien!* Eef you can, dis country she your, by gar! But you die now!"

He lunged swiftly, a knife held before him. Peter, dropping the empty pistol, snatched his spare, leveled the piece and triggered. There was no flash. He tried the second barrel, with the same dead *click*. The priming was wet or lost. And Guillot was close, desperately close.

Stepping backward, Peter tripped over the flexing leg of the dying horse and went down, Guillot's blade barely flicking the fringe of his jacket. As he soared for the finishing thrust, Guillot met Peter's jackknifing legs, hurtled backward to an awkward, jarring fall.

They came up together, Peter relying now upon his knife. They circled, sparring. At first contact, Peter knew lack of food had left him no match for this giant. All he had was speed, and desperately he used it. Dancing about, he saw an opening, lunged in and struck. Laughing, Guillot parried it, flicking Peter's knife from his fingers. Recoiling from the deadly counter stroke, Peter spun, scooping for the fallen blade. Guillot, enjoying a game he couldn't lose, kicked Peter's arm, numbing it, felling him.

The renegade's laughter echoed. "Now, *mon enfant,* I slit your windpipe." He slid in, blade swishing. Peter's hand closed about a heavy pitch knot, left by high-water. He swung as he rose, struck Guillot's knife arm, sending the weapon flying. The Vide Poche roared with pain, backing before Peter's onslaught. And he was bawling for help. "*Hoi,* Jules! *Au secours!* Help! Queek weeth the gon, comrade."

Startled, Peter paused, glanced up-trail. There a swart breed stepped from cover, lifting a rifle. As Peter lunged for the protection of the dead pony, a knife flashed from the thickets, buried to the hilt in the breed's chest. He eyed the buckhorn haft in amazement, clawed weakly and tumbled to the ground.

Guillot, disarmed and frightened, dashed into the thickets. Guided by the crashing, Peter pursued him. Hoof echoes rose, and dust hung in the air when Peter came to two tethered ponies. Guillot, killer and tyrant, was gone.

More grateful to Pierre for his teamwork than perturbed about Guillot's escape, Peter led the two ponies back to the trail. It took many furs each year to buy plains ponies for the long trek back from rendezvous.

★

THE sun was high when Peter, Nancy and Pierre came to the rendezvous, by way of a trail now unguarded. Riding abreast, with one led pony, they came smiling to the half-timbered park where each year hardy, pleasure-loving trapline blazers brought their empire bounty to trade, drink and find wild relaxation, downing raw rum, gambling, fighting, greeting old friends and making new enemies. Roaring wild *chansons,* swinging the stolid women of Gros Ventre, Piegan, Blackfoots, Bloods and River Crows. This was rendezvous.

Pierre, good natured after whetting the nicks from his double-edged blade, came singing a woods *chanson.*

Indians paused to listen at their fires. Somewhere a deep voice joined in. Be-

fore the log trading post, near water's edge, men stared, then added their hoarse, unmusical accompaniment. Bearded trappers, roused from sleep, raised up from their beds in the scores of batteaux drawn high at the bank.

Behind the trading post, a sidewheeler packet had her nose on the bank, lashed fore and aft to trees. Her name, *Missouri Queen,* showed at her bow and on her single black stack. Negro stokers on the boiler deck grinned at this sudden lift in men's spirits.

Buckskinned figures leaped to meet the new arrivals, hollering, waving.

"Dogged if it ain't Peter Bendamon!"

"Glad you made 'er, Peter. Heard you'd gone under."

"And Pierre Belette. Groton Walker said he seen you dumped fer the catfish."

"Who's the fluff an' fofarraw, boys? By hoss an' beaver, yore throats must be dry. Le's open a jug."

Pierre alighted in a pack of well wishers. A jug was pressed into his hands and he drank. Peter watched Nancy as they passed uncouth men who had lived far from life's niceties. She was smiling, catching at extended hands, answering their coarse greetings. She too had been close to the raw and untamed.

Peter helped her down at the Post, where Groton Walker met them. "Good boy," the Big Hole man enthused shaking Peter's hand. "I wouldn't have given five cents for your chances, or for Pierre's. Who's this?"

"Nancy Cook, Groton. You remember —the looting of the *Eliza Cook* packet."

Walker whistled, shook Nancy's hand fervently. "Will this put new life in old Jeremiah. He's spent a fortune hunting you, girl. This means a thousand dollars for you, Peter, in Saint Louis. I could use that myself. You going down to collect it?"

The girl blushed at the inference. Peter scowled. "Saint Louis is too rich for my blood, Groton." His eyes swept the river bank. "What, only one packet? How about Great Northern?"

Walker smiled coldly. "Their *Andrew Jackson's* hung up on a bar at Milky Creek, hundred and fifty miles downriver. Sad, eh? Cap Stotes discarded Great Northern's scare yarns about hostile Indians an' a thin catch, an' he fetched his *Queen* up. All others shied off. He'll make some money."

Peter was puzzled. "Why would Great Northern hang up? Water's high. They have the best men and equipment. If they've foundered, there's a reason."

"Such as what, Peter? Nope, their luck clabbered an' everybody's pleased but Jack Gildford, from Buffalo Post. He's here with several hundred bales—some of it stolen, you can bet. If the *Andrew Jackson* doesn't show today, he'll have to pay Stotes prime peltry to tote his stuff, if he can get Stotes to deal. What about the gal?"

"She'll go down on the *Missouri Queen.* Le's go see Stotes about a booking."

They found Captain Stotes, a small, nervous man, in his cabin, checking accounts with his boss trader. His skin was like old leather and his hazel eyes were all but hidden in a brown beard. He gripped Peter's fingers. "Heard of you, Bendamon." He snapped his words. "An' I'll admire to take Nancy down. Gad, what a break for my friend, Jeremiah Cook! You'll get my best cabin, miss, with my compliments. The boat is yours till your father claims you."

Everybody was kind to Nancy, who was more of a legend than reality. She was crying a little when Peter left her at the cabin door. Business was brisk in the Post when Peter and Walker came in. Clerks behind the counter examined and graded and priced pelts, dickering with owners and paying in staples: powder, lead, knives and axes, guns, cloth and tobacco, and a score of food items for trapline cabins and caches.

After a drink, Peter went to Walker's camp, where he broke his fast on a savory stew, and felt strength run through him again. Afterward he visited camps, searching faces, passing the time with high country friends. And so he came to the great pile of baled pelts, at the river's edge. Here were a score of men, none familiar. Some slept. A few were eating. The rest smoked or rested, full fed. In a land of tough, cruel men, this outfit was patently made up of hard cases.

Bulky, short-legged Jake Gildford, factor of Buffalo Post, rose from his blanket, white teeth flashing. There was something

likable about this chuckling, coarse-grained pirate of the fur country. "Peter Bendamon, by damn!" he cried, shoving out his hand. "Long time no meet, boy. How you doin'?"

They exchanged grips, Peter grimacing.

"All right, Jake, no thanks to you."

"To me?"

"I've got to be all right, Jake, to bust your blockade. You guessed right as to trail, but not on the men you sent. Two are dead. Next time send better men, or more of them."

Gildford's smile faded. "Which two?"

"Your Vide Poche trouble-shooter was saved, Jake, thanks to a faulty priming."

"Vide Poche? Oh, you mean Guillot?" Gildford scoffed. "You think that big slob works for me? Hell, no! He owed Great Northern and I take his pelts till he's paid up. . . ."

"Let it float thataway, Jake." Peter smiled thinly. "But I'm not swallowing the pap. Everybody knows Great Northern, her dirty work and crooked *superieurs.*"

Now Gildford dropped all simulation. Black flames danced in his eyes. "You've called it and you're right. You've been lucky but you can't win. We're out to gobble you independents, or kill you—one. You've got the summer to decide. If you crave fight, you'll really get it, come next trap-baiting."

"Thanks for the warning, Jake. It means we'll take more scalps than we planned, next fall. Look out yours ain't amongst 'em."

Jake's fury blazed and he spluttered, his hand snapping to his knife sheath. Like a darting bird, another blade came sailing out of nowhere, carrying Jake's hat off. And Pierre came rolling up, a jug in his hand, gloriously tipsy.

"You got pale, M'sieu' Gildfor'," he laughed. "Nex' tam I spare ze hat. Ze throat ees easier to hit, remember zat." He retrieved the knife, returned the frozen Gildford's hat and linked arms with Peter. Together they walked away, daring the stunned Great Northern men, the only witnesses.

Pierre laughed his soft laugh. "Good t'ing Pierre see zat, *mon ami.* I t'ink dat *maudit* try keel you."

"He promises to, next fall. Great Northern's going to gulp us down, he says."

"*Bon!* Zen zey got ze stomach-ache sure. *Voilá,* a tough bite to digest, *moi.*" He tilted the jug again.

It looked like Pierre was due to get very, very drunk.

CHAPTER THREE

Enter the Carcajou!

DURING the afternoon, with the tempo of life quickening perceptibly, Peter rested on a blanket in Walker's camp, watching the Great Northern camp. Jake and his men were either catching up on the sleep, or building against meager rest to come. Several times, Peter noticed Indians from a wickiup camp upstream, come down and receive rum. Already there was whooping and howling at the wickiups.

Among Great Northern auxiliaries were many River Crows, and the fact that these were all bucks carried a warning. Not a squaw among them. The Gildfords of furland, employing Indians for dirty work, saw to two things: women were kept away, and strong liquor plentifully supplied. If Jake planned a coup here, among these playful independent trappers, he was in for a spanking.

Groton Walker listened to Peter, scoffed at the idea, but nonetheless cautioned his men to be on their toes and made the rounds of the camps, dropping quiet warnings. It was getting dark when seven men came riding to Gildford's camp to spread their blankets. They avoided the firelight so Peter could see little of them, except that the leader was a tall, massive man with coal-black beard and glove-fitting buckskins. The man stirred recollection in Peter.

After dark, great fires sprang up. Men talked loud and rum flowed like water. A fandango started at the dancing place and mountaineers crowded in, two and three deep, to watch, to stamp, clap their hands and sing. A fiddler sawed busily. Women came from nearby teepees, prideful in beads and fofarraw, jingling bells and paint. Some young, some old, some in-between, it was all the same to men if they could endure the whirling, stomping, jig-

ging steps. On the outskirts, lean, sullen bucks looked on with friendless eyes.

Groton Walker and his men were dancing. Pierre and his cronies drank and gambled at the Post. Peter, alone by his dying fire, watched Gildford's River Crow friends who were uninterested in the dance as they passed the pipe and jug about the fire. It was too much like a ritual, not to have indicated that they were chosen for something.

Having convinced himself, Peter quit his blanket, melted into the darkness.

Not long afterward, the River Crows fell silent in their talk. One bounced up, barking a swift gutteral, pointing between the wickiups. They came up, staring spellbound. Then one uttered a blood-curdling yell, whirled and ran toward the fandango. The rest followed him.

The fiddler halted his sawing. Dancers crowded around the jabbering, gesticulating Crows, gleaning the information that Carcajou—the Indian devil, the demon, the destructive one—had visited their fire. The *windigo* that fetches only death and doom to those it visits, made doubly terrifying now because of the legend of its preying upon Great Northern Fur, its partisans and its auxiliaries.

Pandemonium broke loose as mountain men searched the ground at the Crow camp, too full of rum to read sign. Soon Peter joined the throng, smiling scornfully.

Jake Gildford came to him, eyes narrowed. "Funny thing, Bendamon. Wherever this Carcajou shows, you're not far away." He glanced around, nervously. "Where's that Canuck of yours?"

"Gambling at the Post, Jake. Nope, you're on the wrong track there."

"Couldn't be you, could it?"

"Could it?" Peter turned away, behind his laugh a judgment that Gildford's discernment had spelled his doom. Returning to his blanket, Peter succumbed to weariness. It seemed only minutes he slept, yet when he woke dawn was filtering in and the Crow bucks were carrying Great Northern fur to the post. Maybe earning yesterday's rum, Peter thought, and went looking for Jake and his men.

At the post, he found Pierre and others asleep on the floor, but no trace of Gildford. A blear-eyed mountaineer told him of a midnight messenger, of Gildford making a deal with Cap Stotes to ship on the *Missouri Queen,* then galloping away with his men.

Uneasy, Peter went aboard the packet, found Nancy up and in the wheelhouse with the captain, interested, comfortable and impatient. The captain was mellow. "Gildford routed me out at midnight, Peter, an' paid dear for it. I asked a third or nothing, an' got it. An' first pick of the pelts, in the bargain."

It was robbery, but with Great North-

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ern getting the worst of it, they could laugh over it. The captain had no knowledge of Gildford's departure, so Peter tried elsewhere. . . .and vainly. The day passed slowly for him. Groton Walker completed his trading and swapped his batteaux to an outfit bound down-river, taking ponies which he would pack for the return trip in the morning. The overloaded *Missouri Queen* would slip her moorings at daybreak. Soon the rendezvous would be deserted, the fur hunters scattering to the four winds.

In the dusk Peter stood at the Post, watching the nervous Crow bucks load the Gildford peltry aboard the packet. Pierre, puffy under the eyes, joined him. "*Mon ami* you look ver' sleepy."

"I can't sleep."

"Why you not try countin' ze sheeps, *non?*"

"Better yet, Pierre, I'm counting those River Crows loading fur. But it's only helped to wake me up, watching those bucks. Strange, there were twenty-six at first. Now there's twelve."

"*Sacre!*" Pierre's eyes narrowed. "Where zey go?"

"They're hidden on the *Missouri Queen!*" Peter fell silent, watching a man stalk from the shadows, walk up the gangplank, climb the ladder and enter a cabin. He was the vaguely familiar giant who had led the six riders to Gildford's camp last evening. He carried a long, buckskin-covered roll which didn't break where it rested on his shoulder. "Say, who's that fellow, Pierre?"

Pierre didn't know. In the captain's cabin, Peter learned the man had signed as John Smith, of Uintah Post. Peter, no more enlightened, was intrigued by the man's luxurious, curly beard. He tried to imagine that hirsute appendage shaved off, and the mental picture caused him to whistle.

Only one acquaintance fitted that frame. Flewellen—Cullen Yost Flewellen, who dreamed of empire and counted no cost too great to achieve his aim. Peter's eyes were agate as he went to Groton Walker. "I'm not going back with you, Groton."

The fur man grinned knowingly. "So it's Saint Louis after all? I don't blame you."

"No! Unless I'm crazy, the *Missouri* Queen will be looted and stranded at the mouth of Milky Creek and the loaded *Andrew Jackson* will be steaming for Saint Louis. The crime will be laid to renegade Indians, of course. Flewellen's aboard, and fourteen of Gildford's Crows . . . .maybe more. Gildford's gone somewhere. Use your judgment."

Walker's bronzed face went gray. "Jeremiah's girl?" he murmured.

Peter shrugged and Pierre, having listened, caught his arm. "You go aboard to fight alone, *mon ami? Non,* Pierre go wiz you."

"No," said Peter. "They can't be smoked out beforehand. Otherwise they're only stowaways."

"We can't take this lying down," protested Walker. "It's our best chance to peg Great Northern and throw a crimp into them. Let's all go aboard."

"Scare them off, and we'd wind up in Saint Louis," said Peter. "No. If you want to do something, mount a hundred fighting men to Milky Creek. The trail's shorter and you'll have twelve hours start."

"By godfrey," boomed Walker, slapping Peter's shoulder. "There's a fighting idea! Come along, Pierre!"

★

THE season's first heat crept up river, making the night sultry. Lightning hit the far sky and thunder muttered over the badlands. The *Missouri Queen* had made bad time, thanks to Peter's adroit meddling, but Captain Stotes took it philosophically.

"What's the hurry?" he chuckled, as he and Peter sat at ease on the pilot deck. "We got lots of time an' I don't want to crowd you with that Cook gal. Don't blame you for decidin' to ride with us, boy. If I was thutty year younger, I'd give you a battle there. Injun life ain't hurt her one whit, neither. Modern gals don't understand matchin' their man's hard work. That's a Injun gal's first lesson."

Peter snorted, but was less interested in arguing his innocence of romantic ideas than in the imminence of Milky Creek. A black butte, according to the captain's description, sat across from the mouth of

the creek. "Aim to slow down an' rub it into Cap Sully McBain for groundin' his packet," he grinned. "I've took enough off that high an' mighty gentleman, believe me."

Darkness was settling and a flash of heat lightning showed the black butte dead ahead. And, across from it, the twin stacks of the darkened *Andrew Jackson*. Restless, Peter left Stotes, descended to the cabin deck, probing the gloom at the door to Flewellen's cabin. The man had kept close all day, not even appearing for meals. Now his cabin door stood open. Peter hurried forward, looking for Flewellen. And then a roared challenge came from the River.

"Shut 'er off, Stotes! Pull over to the north bank or we'll blow you up!"

Stotes yelled: "Go to hell!" Then roaring: "Piracy!" he belled for full speed ahead. To the pilot, he rapped: "Hold her straight, Mac. Steady as she goes."

The up-and-down engine throbbed, quickened the paddles of the *Missouri Queen*. Gun-flame lit the river; bullets thudded into the superstructure. Lightning showed a batteaux and five men, all wtih rifles. And it showed Peter more.

Up ahead, Flewellen leaned over the rail and he was dropping his long bundle. As Peter watched, he vanished around the forward cabin. The sky flare faded and blackness came again. And howls were coming from the boiler deck, where Negro stokers voiced a sudden terror. Heavy splashes came from near the stern as the engine crew jumped overboard to escape.

Peter swung over the rail, dropped to the boiler deck. A burdened Indian had already passed, staggering aft between piled peltry. Peter leaped after him, bore him to the deck. The buck's yell died abruptly as Peter's knife did its work. Peter heaved the body into the river, felt the bundle. "Rifles," he said, and dropped them overboard. "These won't trouble us tonight."

Chaos ruled the *Missouri Queen*. Captain Stotes was berating the pilot and calling for Nancy, all in one breath. Somewhere on the cabin deck, Flewellen was exhorting the Crows to split—half to join him, half to answer the cry of their tribesman with the guns. The batteaux closed in, the men yelling and firing. Control of the *Missouri Queen* had passed to the engine room; she was slewing toward the north bank, her engines racing. And Crow bucks, wild with rum, were pounding toward Peter, with guns from the engine room rack.

Pressed by fearful odds, Peter blasted a pistol shot at the advancing Crows. One went down, shrilling his death-song. Guns blazed and bullets sang around Peter. He halted them momentarily with another shot, then went to the deck as the packet

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grounded with a crash. And the bucks surged toward him, knives bared.

Others were pouring around the fo' castle, yelling. Caught between fires, Peter rose, made his last two shots count, then vaulted the rail into knee-deep water and splashed ashore. Their bullets went wild.

Peter lived with regret, panting there in the darkness, reloading, listening to the renegades crush all resistance. There was a short, sharp struggle on the pilot deck that ended with Cap Stotes' curses tailing out in a moan. Nancy Cook screamed. A wild wolf-howl of victory, and Guillot's hoarse orders to loot the *Missouri Queen.*

Now lights showed on the *Andrew Jackson.* Its engines hummed. Its paddles pulled it to the bank beside the smaller packet. Torches were lighted; a gangplank laid. Men swarmed like ants, shifting the peltry. From the pilot deck of the Great Northern boat, four men watched eagerly. "The fools," sneered Gildford. "Thinkin' they could buck the Company."

"Oui." Guillot loughed. "We not even got a good fight from dose rabbit. When we br'ak out de rom, M'sieu's?"

Flewellen, standing aloof from this pair and blear-eyed Captain McBain, only snorted. First in his book, the independents must be dominated, organized. And then—his eyes burned—Great Northern must be smashed. And Flewellen would be the strong name in Northwestern furlands.

With scores of men working, an hour saw the job finished, the men shouting for meat and rum. A great fire sprang up on the bank. Venison was fetched from the *Andrew Jackson,* and rum and whiskey. The celebration began riotously. Captain McBain, gross, thick-necked, whiskey-veined, spread his arms expansively.

"A glad sight, gentlemen," he cried. "Result of sagacious planning and clever execution. Success without regret. Relaxation and regalement of the inner man with red meat and wine. At dawn, we light the *Missouri Queen* as a burnt offering, shake hands and sadly part as good friends must. It has been splendid, gentlemen. Honor me at the cup of fellowship, in my cabin."

As they accompanied him to his cabin, they failed to notice the figure slink from the willows, wade to their packet and step aboard. Nor did the revelers, busy with cup, hear the added murmur of waters.

In the captain's quarters, the four men ringed a table, under a hanging lamp.

"To Great Northern," toasted McBain, thick-tongued. "Long may she rule."

"Bon! Good tradin' at de bes' rendezvous in de Nort', by gar. Ha!"

Though he drank, Flewellen offered nothing. Gildford eyed him. "You act down in the mouth, Handsome. Why?"

"I'd feel better, Jake, if Guillot hadn't muffed his chance to lay that Bendamon man dead. And if you'd use any sense about Stotes and the girl, by cutting their throats!"

"Hoi," barked the Vide Poche. "You not satisfy with how I handle Bendamon, you handle him yourself! And eef you cot de t'roat of my *pigeonneau,* I keel you!"

"Steady, Guillot." Jake Gildford scowled. "Flewellen, the gal goes back to Guillot. An' he'd better see she don't talk. Stotes will die, but not before we get all he's saved on this river—in ransom. You wouldn't dump fifty thousand?"

Before Flewellen could answer, a gun echo came from outside, and a yell. Then the sudden, explosive tumult of conflict. "What's that?" snapped Jake.

They caught their breaths, staring at the misshapen creature framed in the doorway. A contorted face peering from between strands of greasy hair; arms angled to hooked talons, poised above the pistols at his waistband.

"The Carcajou!" Remembering another such visitation, Flewellen recoiled.

Guillot dropped his glass and stared at the fearsome thing his Indians had described. The captain kept gulping, as if something choked him. Gildford showed more studiousness than fear. The Carcayou spoke softly:

"The shooting, m'sieu's? It is your renegades dying before the independents."

Gildford suddenly pointed. "Boys, this is Bendamon! I give you credit for nerve, Peter, but not judgment. Handsome, you want him dead, eh? Well. . . ."

He sprang sideways, pulling a pistol. Guillot moved, quick as a snake. Flewellen drove his hand to his weapon. The captain, smelling the musky promise of

Carcajou death, whimpered fearfully. The room was suddenly filled with the crash of guns. The Carcajou's hands dipped and he moved as he shot.

Gildford's pistol wasn't free when he fell, a bullet between his eyes. Guillot's knife was poised when lead split his heart. The squealing captain, bolting for the door, took a slug meant for Flewellen. His dead hand raked the Carcajou's weapon, clawing off a flint, spinning the killer back against the door jamb. Flewellen fired, and rushed the door.

The Carcajou met him, swinging his pistols. Blows rent the man's nose, broke his jaw. Men had called him Handsome. They would call him Handsome again—only as a jest and an insult, and he would kill them for use of the term. Now, in a frenzy of fear and pain, he fought free, caromed to the deck, tripped over the rail and fell screaming into the river.

★

ON THE bank, the battle ebbed as mountain men roared their battle cries and chased the renegades into the river, their knives running red. Pierre Belette and Groton Walker led a squad aboard the *Andrew Jackson* to investigate gunplay there. What they found was death in the captain's cabin and, on the other side of the packet, Peter Bendamon axing down a door, behind which Cap Stotes and Nancy Cook were imprisoned. The little Canuck squealed his displeasure.

"I am mad, *mon ami.* Glad you are safe, *oui,* but steel mad. Always I miss zat *maudit, Le Carcajou,* w'en she come to keel. *Mon Dieu,* she 'ave keel Gildford, Guillot and *le capitain.* You not see heem?"

"Of course, Pierre."

"An' you not shoot heem?"

"Hell no. He was saving my life." Peter broke down the door, cut the bonds of the imprisoned pair, led them out. The fight was over and independent warriors were sating thirst and hunger in barreled liquor and broiled venison.

"We better join them," sighed Cap Stotes, when he and the girl had fully expressed their gratitude. "Maybe if they get real drunk, I can talk them into helping reload the peltry, come morning."

"They'll have nothing else to do," said Peter, "while they rest the ponies. I'll bet the little beasts are near foundering."

"No lie," grunted Walker. "It'll be a week before they're any good."

"Give 'em a treat," suggested Cap Stotes. "Load 'em on the *Andrew Jackson.* Run her up to the mouth of the Kai-ai-yu, three hundred fifty mile from here. With the water risin', it's worth tryin', eh? If you wreck her, who cares beside Great Northern? Sa-a-ay, the boys should pay in labor for that idea."

Peter agreed, linked arms with Pierre and left the packet to put the matter up to the victors in the Independents' first pitched battle with Great Northern. And as he moved, Peter was humming a *chanson* of the wilderness, about the mysterious master of the fur trails, Le Carcajou; a song which would be sung so long as those bearded, buckskin-clad Independents kept Spring rendezvous in the vast mountain country.

THE END

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Star Western, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1943. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Star Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September 1943. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 4W359. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

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SAYMAN SALVE

(Continued from page 6)

that he'd got into a ruckus at some dance hall and landed in the jug about the same time I'd got pinched for not carrying the U.S. Treasury strapped to my back. What they called, "No visible means of support." Having just landed in that town at sundown, and paid for my grub by diving for pearls, I'd made the mistake of trying to wait until daylight before hunting a job.

Pretty soon they let us out, took us to the city limits and told us that the telegraph wires running alongside the railroad tracks would keep the rain off if we kept under them until we got to the next town.

Mister, I'd never been so full-up with a town since I saw New York City, so we kind of angle off the tracks after a a while, and managed to pick up a truck, heading west. . . .

Sometimes we got a job on a sheep ranch, sometimes packing apples or working around outfits in Oregon. Whatever it was, if there wasn't a job for both of us, we shoved on. Once I won three hundred bucks at faro—I saw them fire the houseman that same night—and Domingo and I split 'er right down the middle. Another time I got laid up with the flu and Domingo got and paid for a doc that hauled me through it. Plenty of times we were back to back against some bunch that thought they could take a big Mex and his pard, but to date they never did.

Domingo said that his old man ran a few sheep in Wyoming, and when we split up, he wanted me to come down and visit him. About a year or so later I did. I found that his old man ran one of the biggest sheep outfits in that part of the country. And Domingo—my pardner of all that's left of the open trails—had graduated from the State University, and had hobbled himself down to a job teaching—being a college professor! He claimed he was trying to teach folks to get along with each other; sociology or something like that. But he didn't talk and he didn't fight like any of these professors that I ever saw.

Like I said, I think the fellows who are used to the open air are a different breed from the city people. Right the day after Pearl Harbor, both Domingo and I enlisted together in Navy. Domingo's still there; I saw last month where he'd got his commission. Any guy who serves with him is serving with a real man. Me, I collected a busted knee-cap, and an honorable discharge. But as soon as I was able to be around, I signed up with the Merchant Marine. To date I've made four round trips; we were standing off a Scottish port, and we took more there than we did during my short stretch with cruiser I served on, more power to the old lady!

Don't fool yourself. It isn't fun. It's damn hard work, and we want to get it finished up as soon as we can. But, as I recall our history, nobody in this country has ever told a lot of city people that they had a couple of hours to get the hell out of their homes and go live in the country. Nobody's ever told me to pack my blanket and go spend the rest of the days in the city, like the Nazis do in Europe, and like the Japs would if they got a chance over here.

Me, I may not know much about the hifalutin talk about freedom of democratic ideals. But I know I'm helping to carry the stuff so that the guys who want to live in the country can live there, and those that want to live in the city can live there, too.

Thanks, Joe. Somehow a letter like yours kind of make us know a little better what we're all fighting for, and we'd like to hear more from you when you get a chance. The very best of luck to you—and to Domingo!

To Texas

Here's a transplanted Texan, from Oklahoma City, J. McDermot, who—believe it or not—likes things mostly about the Lone Star State. However, as you can see, Mr. McDermot would also like to read bits of verse or what-have-you about other states of the West. Welcome

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to the Branding Corral, Mac!

Dear Strawboss:

. . . the funny thing about these Western magazine stories is that a real Texan can't be fooled. If, as you say, most of your writers are Westerners, I can take your word for it. But you've never gone straight down the line and said that such-and-such is a Texan. Maybe you don't know. But if Fred Gipson isn't a Texan, then I'm an Oklahoman or an Eskimo—which I'm not. Any man who can talk about blue bonnets, and about Llano country like he does, about hogs as well as cattle, is home folks.—*(Fred's Texas Strawboss.)*

Although I have, many times, heard the following doggerel from various lips, I quote from his book, *The Flower of Texas* because it seems to be presented in a more pasteurized version, and more fitted to a family magazine than other versions I have heard.

Perhaps it was first invented by that Texan who, after traveling for many days and nights from where he started, asked the first man whom he met what state he was in. The answer was, of course, "Texas."

Here it is:

HELL IN TEXAS

The devil was given permission one day,
To create him a land for his own special sway.
He scattered tarantulas over the roads
Put thorns on the cactus and horns on the toads.
He lengthened the horns of the Texas steer
And added a foot to the jackrabbit's ear.
He hung thorns and brambles on all of the trees,
He mixed up the dust with a million fleas
He increased the power of the bronco's buck
A centepede's feet were just your tough luck
The heat in the summer's a hundred and ten

Too hot for the Devil, and too cold for men. . . .

Maybe among your Branding Corral outfit there are some unfortunate persons who live outside the borders of the Lone Star State. If so, I wonder if they have any such rhymes of their native heaths?

I would like to make this challenge: I will guarantee, if not a verse, at least one good glowing account of anything that lives, grows or exists in Texas, to beat any verse or good descriptive paragraph, of or about any other Western state sent in by any of your readers.

I'll leave it to you Straw, to be the judge. Or, in case you don't care to, or feel yourself unfit for that exalted position, my rivals and I will choose a judge mutually suitable. . . .

Well, Mr. McDermot, it looks like you've started something there. As you say, however, this is a family magazine, and censorable as such. But if anyone would like to accept Mr. McDermot's challenge, here's your chance.

That reminds us, if anyone knows the real version of that immortal peroration called *Change the Name of Arkansaw?* as it was supposed to have been delivered in Congress, giving the author and date of delivery, and send it on to us for our personal delectation, he will be the recipient of three cigars—name, and brand of his own choosing. Or a drink, if and when he gets within drinking distance.

The floor is waiting for the gentleman from "Arkansaw."

Apaches After Dark

A slight fulmination from G. James Murphy, U. S. N. R., at present c-o Postmaster, N. Y. C.

Dear Strawboss:

. . . and where in the name of all the collected and revered saints did any of the authors of these stories ever get the idea Indians attacked after dark? Speaking for myself, I can check out, but my old man's old man used to have a waltz now and again with some of the more unpleasant of our red

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brethren, one Victorio, down in Arizona, around the early '80s.

So I got it straight, for the benefit of those who don't know, that Apaches, at least, hit the sack after dark. However, here's a little experience that showed they did have some of their boys wide-awake after sundown.

My old man's old man was detailed to an Army post. He was chosen to go with some of the other gents out on a scout one day, during which time they must have stepped on the toes of old Vic and his mob. They had a West Point kid in command, and the kid had sense enough to fort 'em up in a circle of rocks, just off a wild oat-field. Come night things quieted down, and a couple of the more heroic characters decided to try to get through.

They snuck out, about twenty-five men—and started toward the post. But they'd gotten about half a mile, well into the oat-field when they stopped. And for a good reason. The Injuns had fired the field—the wind being right for the Injuns, and not so good for my progenitor's outfit.

I wish that I might say, for my own ego, that it was my revered forebear who thought of a backfire, but I can't, in all honesty. It was the West Point shavetail. They backfired, and retreated until no more fire. Then they rode like hell for the fort.

That's the only time I ever heard of Indians attacking after dark. I don't know about other tribes, but my grandfather was always known as a very truthful man, except when maybe he'd lie a little like all of us do. So I'll take his word for it, and stick to it.

Thank you, G. James. We, we wouldn't know, because we were, like yourself, a couple of generations removed from that time and place. But it seems to us one of the moot questions. Did Indians attack at night? And if so, what tribes, where were they, and under what circumstances? We'll hold out for the grandson of a night-fighting Indian, and reserve top place for his answer!

Hasta luego!

—STRAWBOSS.

★ UP THE TRAIL ★

IT WAS late afternoon when Chip Johnson halted his ox-drawn wagon, and clambered to the ground. From under the white tilt came the cries of his six-month-old getting fed; the wordless comforting sounds of his young wife.

"Well," he called cheerfully, "it looks like the Johnson family have landed! We'll use the wagon for a few days until I get some logs cut, and the cabin started. There's good feed, good water here. Don't you fret, Mary, I'll scare up some pat'ridges for dinner. . . ."

By that fall the little cabin was snug and tight; smoke rose from the chinked chimney; fall planting was almost finished; and already Chip had negotiated for a small herd, to be grazed on shares for next Spring. But although Mary tried her best not to show it, Chip could tell that the isolated, lonely life was doing her no good. And there was another baby coming at any time now.

He was thinking as he rode toward town for the doctor how much easier for her if there were only someone near at hand, to count on in case of sudden trouble. The nearest neighbor was a good twelve miles away—a veteran of the Confederate Army who, so Chip had heard, hated the sight of a Northerner. His next nearest was a family of half-breed Crees; another—still miles away—was an old settler who never appeared in town sober. . . .

In town he had to wait for the doc, so he was late returning with the medico. It was dusk when they reached the last crest where, in the distant clearing, he could make out his small ranch. And then, abruptly, his heart leaped to his

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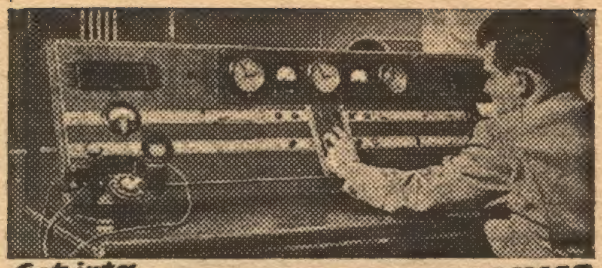

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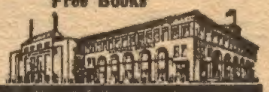

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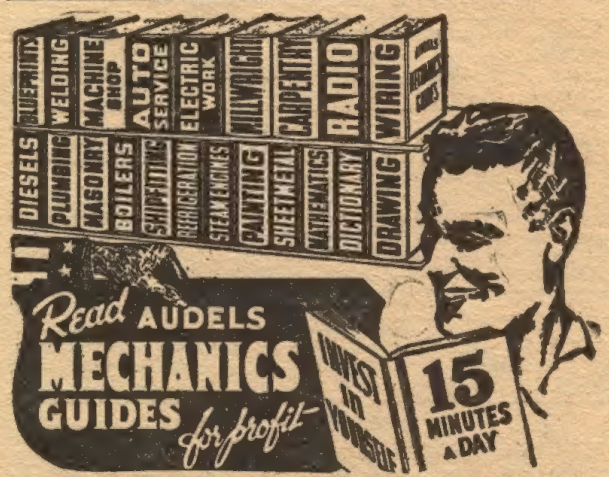

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mouth. For where his proud, rugged little home had stood only yesterday, there remained only smouldering ruins.

He cut out ahead on his horse, jacking shells into his saddle-gun. But when he got there a warm glow of thanksgiving spread over him. For from the shelter of the corn crib came the small wail of a new-born infant. . . .

And there, too, was the ex-Confederate who hated all damnyankees; the breed Crees, with the oldest boy busy over a cook-fire and the big girl emerging from the shelter where she had been tending Mary. And there was even the gray-whiskered old plainsman.

The old-timer in his greasy old buckskins, bobbed his bald head. "Out here, mister, we like room to breathe an' work. But at the same time, we don't never like to feel we're too far away to help out a neighbor. An' now I reckon we might as well all bend our backs and give you a hand toward buildin' another shanty."

Chip Johnson, after he had seen that his wife and new baby were all right, had to swallow a strange lump in his throat before he could reply. But he reckoned that this was a pretty good country after all, for a man to raise a family in.

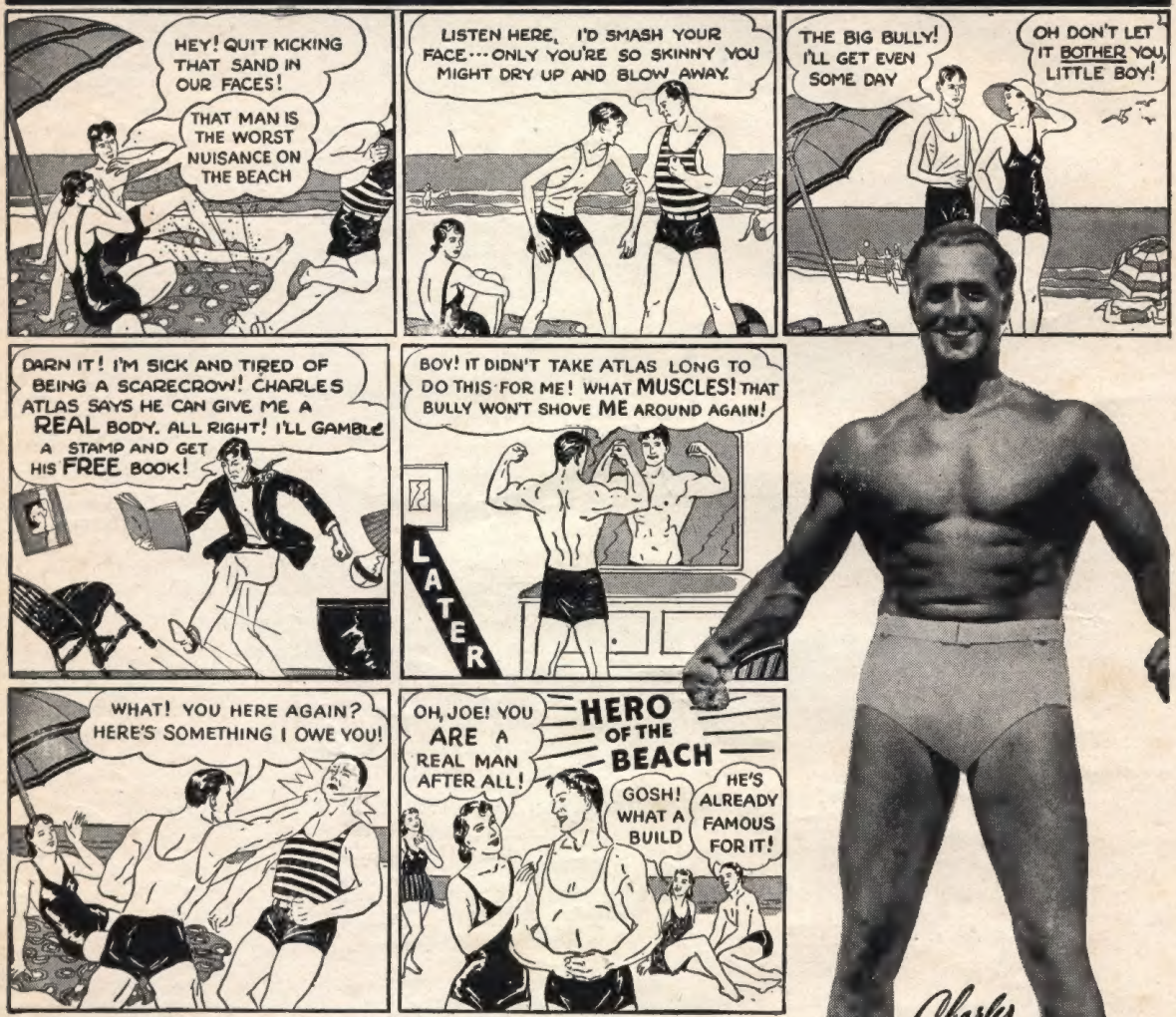
That homely little anecdote, we feel, is especially applicable during these times, because it stands as typical, not only of the West, but wherever good neighbors are needed.

We see it today in the response to the various national and community drives which are part of our War effort. That those drives are necessary is self-evident. But it might be well if we realize they go on every hour of the day and night—so long as our fighting men are risking their lives for the country we all love.

Don't wait to be reminded by posters or by a ringing doorbell to buy a War Bond, or to give to the various War Relief agencies, in both time or money. Or don't think that your blood donations for the plasma that might save the life of one you love most dearly is not needed urgently every day of the year.

Surely, we'll back the War Drives to the limit. And we'll realize, also, that the need does not cease when the drive is over!

HOW JOE'S BODY BROUGHT HIM FAME INSTEAD OF SHAME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THAT MAN IS THE WORST NUISANCE ON THE BEACH
LISTEN HERE, I'D SMASH YOUR FACE··· ONLY YOU'RE SO SKINNY YOU MIGHT DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY.
THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY
OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU, LITTLE BOY!
DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY. ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STAMP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!
BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME! WHAT MUSCLES! THAT BULLY WON'T SHOVE ME AROUND AGAIN!
LATER
WHAT! YOU HERE AGAIN? HERE'S SOMETHING I OWE YOU!
OH, JOE! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!
HERO OF THE BEACH
GOSH! WHAT A BUILD
HE'S ALREADY FAMOUS FOR IT!

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Address.....

City.....State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A

Think twice before you gobble!

Food is the mightiest weapon of all. This holiday season, buy and cook only what you need. Eat it all. Waste nothing. Share with those who need it most. Food Fights for Freedom.

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